

Celebrating National Suicide Day: Representations of Violence and Identity in the Fiction of Toni Morrison

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I, Kathryn Nicol, declare that this thesis has been composed and completed by me, and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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Abbreviations

Morrison’s texts are abbreviated as follows:

“Recitatif”	“ R ”
<u>The Bluest Eye</u>	<u>BE</u>
<u>Sula</u>	<u>S</u>
<u>Song of Solomon</u>	<u>Song</u>
<u>Tar Baby</u>	<u>TB</u>
<u>Beloved</u>	<u>B</u>
<u>Jazz</u>	<u>J</u>
<u>Paradise</u>	<u>P</u>

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Introduction

In the essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison notes that “There is a conflict between public and private life, and it’s a conflict that I think ought to remain a conflict. Not a problem, just a conflict” (339). Morrison’s recognition of the role of conflict in producing and maintaining the structures of knowledge through which we experience and inhabit the world is a feature of both her fiction and non-fiction writing. In this work, experiences of conflict, and the structures of knowledge which shape these experiences, are submitted to detailed critical examinations. Further, a certain ambivalence towards the resolution of conflict also marks her fictional work in a variety of ways. As Claudia Tate suggests, for the black heroines of black women’s writing, “conflicts are often resolved but are seldom solved” (xxiii). For Morrison’s heroines, and heroes, conflict comes in many forms, and although moments of conflict may recede from their place in the immediate present, few of her narratives suggest that the movement away from moments and sites of conflict can be seen as either the resolution of conflict or its banishment to the past.

As Tate’s comment suggests, an interest in conflict is not restricted to Morrison’s work alone. While Tate sets out to define the particular strategic representations of conflict employed by black women writers in the United States in response to particular personal and political situations that black American women find themselves in, my analysis of the presence and implications of moments of conflict in Toni Morrison’s work will be restricted to her work alone. This is not to suggest that Morrison’s treatment of these subjects is exceptional, or that her work can be read in abstraction from its very real position at sites of race, gender and national identity, and there is potential for the development of this argument into a consideration of Morrison’s works in the context of other black women writers. In part as a result of the wealth of critical work on Morrison’s fiction, I have chosen to focus this study through one question regarding the representation and production of identity in Morrison’s

work: the representation of violence and the structural, textual, ethical and political effects of this representation. Inevitably, the representation of violence must be read in relation to the questions of identity mentioned above. However, I will seek in the course of this analysis to suggest that attention to the problematics of the textual representation of violence constitutes a consistent structural feature of Morrison's work, and that the structural effects of the representation of violence alter the textual conditions under which discourses of identity are constructed in her novels. As a result, I will suggest, characteristic features of her work such as the strategies of ambiguity and paradox through which her characters are represented, the representation of divided and doubled relationships between ideas of the individual, the community and the nation, and the contestation of binary structures are consistent with (although they cannot be reduced to) the ambiguous textual effects of violence in her work. Although many critics have commented upon aspects of the representation of violence in Morrison's work, particularly with regard to specific instances of violence and their racial, class or gendered nature, I hope to extend such critiques to suggest that events of violence and structures of violence pervade Morrison's work and are fully implicated in the strategies of identity and identification that can be found there. In conclusion, I will suggest that the effects of the role of violence in Morrison's novels open her work up to the possibility of a political position which is perhaps more radical than previous analyses of her work have suggested, and also that a shift in the representation of violence in a later work marks the limit of this particular political position.

The critical perspective of this argument does not deny Morrison's identity as a black woman writer, and the implications of this identity return at almost every stage of the argument. However, I will attempt to examine this racial and gendered identity as the subject of Morrison's work and as a subject which is put into question throughout her work. As a result, I do not engage with the body of critical material, typified by the ground breaking work of Nellie McKay and Barbara Christian, which locates Morrison within a tradition of black women's writing in an attempt to illuminate the possibilities of the construction of a black female self in relation to the traditions and imaginative resources of African American culture. Further, although my argument contains detailed

analysis of the social, political and imaginative construction of black identity in Morrison's texts, I do not attempt to construct a critical framework which draws solely on structures of meaning derived from this context¹. Therefore, while I would argue that the question of the black subject remains foundational in Morrison's work, this foundation is produced as contingent through the representation of the black subject as a multiple and contested site of identity. This follows Judith Butler's suggestion, in her analysis of the relationship between feminist theory and deconstructionist philosophy, that "The point is not to do away with foundations, or even champion a position which goes under the name of anti-foundationalism. Both of these positions belong together as different versions of foundationalism" ("Contingent" 7). Black identity in this study then is located not through a search for cultural origins, but as a strategic and oppositional location which can be put to negative and positive ends. As Carole Boyce Davies suggests, in her study of black women's writing and identity:

I want to activate the term 'Black' relationally, provisionally and based on location or position. The term 'Black,' oppositional, resisting, necessarily emerges as whiteness seeks to depoliticise and normalise itself. Still, 'Black' is only provisionally used as we continue to interrogate its meaning and in the ongoing search to find the language to articulate ourselves. (8)

In situating this argument I am also drawing on Worlds of Difference, Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin's detailed study of the relationship between cultural resources and their strategic deployment in Morrison's texts. Harding and Martin suggest that Morrison's texts must be read through structures of difference, as a result of "an ambivalent construction which we call an interface [which] has been created between cultures in conflict" (6). As a result of the structure of difference which they locate at the heart of Morrison's texts, Harding and Martin suggest that the disruption of narrative strategies is ironically centred in these texts, yet "[a]lthough this element in Morrison's work exploits the territory unmapped by rules, it does not merely produce poetic misrule or ethnic funkiness" (8). Further, the confrontation which takes place at the cultural interface has a specifically political nature, implying as it does a move away from the dualistic structures of dominant Western ideologies such as Freudianism and Marxism (9). The cultural interface also has implications for the role of the critic, whose function is no longer to produce homogenised readings of the text, but to take part in the

¹ This is in response to Henry Louis Gates' influential call for the development of black-centred paradigms in literary criticism, "Criticism in the Jungle."

proliferation of meanings that the text produces (10). I wish to adapt this concept of the critical interface to suggest that Morrison's texts inhabit what Davies describes as a "border consciousness" (16) which views identity as already divided within itself². Further, I want to suggest that while Morrison's work is certainly involved in the mapping of new territories, as Harding and Martin suggest, the structure of the border usefully problematises the idea that such mappings can take place in territories which are indeed new, and which are not already inhabited.

As Elaine Jordan has suggested, Morrison's texts produce "tactical 'truth effects,' not truth" (113). I wish to argue that this tactical structure must be kept in mind, not only in the search for the strategies Morrison's texts suggest, but also in the identification of 'truth' in relation to the idea of tactics. As a result, I will suggest throughout this analysis that the implications of the deconstruction of the subject carried out under theories identified as poststructuralist must be kept in mind, in particular the suggestion that the deconstruction of binary structures is not straightforwardly subversive, and that the identification of any position or identity within such structures is not in itself liberatory, but may merely describe "what constitutes the effect of the subject as authoritative, fully present and conscious to itself, masterful and interior" (Deutscher 44). As Derrida states, "Deconstruction cannot be transgressive of the law. Deconstruction *is* the law" ("Beehive" 197). Therefore, while I draw upon the idea and strategies of deconstruction throughout this argument, this is not to suggest that such a reading practice can fully resolve the problems Morrison's texts present us with.

The representation of violence in Morrison's novels has been commented on in a number of works. In particular, Terry Otten's study of the production of narratives of identity through the representation of violent events, The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison, has been influential throughout my readings of Morrison's texts. However, I want to suggest that the significance of representations of violence in these texts cannot be confined to the dualities of innocence and guilt that continue to

² This reading of Morrison also stands in opposition to approaches to her work which have sought to engage with the complexities within her texts through the imposition of a general difference, for example Denise Heinze's suggestion that Morrison's work, through her use of the structure of double consciousness, becomes representative of a national imaginary and a commentary upon the human condition ("Introduction" The Dilemma of Double Consciousness).

structure Otten's argument, even as he opens these up to question. Harding and Martin have also commented on Morrison's representation of violence, suggesting that "As opposed to western conceptions of violence as the ultimate evil in society, Morrison orients herself towards a dual notion of a negative violence (implanted from outside or cultivated within) indissociably linked to the more constructive self-protective violence inflicted by the armed woman or hunter" (147). While Morrison's texts certainly question the straightforward identification of violence with evil, this critique also organises the representation of violence in Morrison's works around a dualistic structure which I do not feel is adequate to the structural effects that representations of violence have upon her texts, or to the excessive nature of specific violent acts which occur in her novels.

My understanding of the nature of violence and the effects of representations of violence is influenced throughout this argument by the arguments of Critical Race Theory, a body of work which focuses on the effects of legal concepts on the structuring of identities under the law and the intersection of these concepts with issues of race and racial difference. While Critical Race Theory has clearly engaged with the imbrication of legal and racial identity, as exemplified by the work of Patricia Williams, the work of theorists such as Drucilla Cornell, in the area of gender identity, and Iris Marion Young, in relation to social justice, have also played a part in developing my argument.

As Dan Danielson suggests in After Identity, a collection of essays on Critical Race Theory, one aspect of this body of work is an exploration of the relationship between violence and the production of the law, including laws of identity. This suggests that violence and the law have multiple, simultaneous and contradictory meanings in specific cultural situations, and that critical readings of the law must seek to destabilise the presumed opposition between violence and the law (273-6). While the force of law suggests that "To be against law is to be violent, irrational, immoral, other" (274), Critical Race Theory and, I will argue, Morrison's textual representations of violence, suggest that violence must be considered as a potential site of contradiction and opposition to the authority of the law. As a result, Morrison's texts free events of violence from "the seemingly extra-discursive reality of violence as well as the legitimacy and efficacy of the law" (Danielson 275). At the same time, however, I do not want to suggest that the event of violence and its representation in Morrison's texts

is simply a condition of being. As John Keane, in his study of violence as an event and ideology in twentieth century history, suggests:

Violence is clothed in an aura of strangeness: its causes and consequences are said either to be understood insufficiently to be amenable to a course of treatment or beyond realistic hope of remedy, especially in extreme circumstances such as coup d'état, revolutions and the jostling and confrontation among armed states. This thoroughly modern belief that violence is inevitable is rarely understood as historically specific, which it most certainly is. (Keane 8)

While Keane rightly reminds us that the apparent inevitability of violence in the contemporary world can be historically located and accounted for, I want to suggest that the contemporary proliferation of violence is precisely the context in which Morrison sets her novels. As this argument proceeds, I will locate the historical contexts of violence which Morrison engages in greater detail.

A significant factor in this historical context is clearly the relationship between African American identity and American national identity. Critical Race Theory not only describes the relationship between individual identities as the law as a source of authority, but also describes the ways in which the law constructs its authoritative nature in particular arenas, including that of national identity. In addition to the critique of authority made possible by Critical Race Theory, I have also made use of arguments drawn from postcolonial criticism, particularly those of Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha. The appeal of the works of these critics is their attention to the formation of national identity as a response to and shaping of the authoritative power of the state. In particular, Fanon's identification of the violence of colonial oppression which uses the language of identity, and description of the conditions in which a revolutionary, rather than reactionary violence, may be possible, becomes crucial to my attempts to account for the many episodes of violence which are experienced and carried out by Morrison's characters. Therefore my argument at times takes a postcolonial approach rather than focusing closely on the work of African American critics such as Henry Louis Gates, Houston A. Baker and Cornell West, despite the fact that these critics have often been read alongside, and have directly engaged with, Morrison's work. The value of the postcolonial approach here is in the ways in which postcolonial critics figure national boundaries as staged out with and within the nation. I believe that Morrison has been most often identified as a writer who engages with communities within the nation, mostly obviously with African American communities. While this is clearly an important

aspect of her work, I wish to argue that the fractures in communal identities found in Morrison's texts enact a specific engagement with the question of American identity as a national identity, and that the position of African Americans in relation to this national identity, as represented in her texts, bears a strong relationship to the unhomely national identities described by postcolonial theory.

The first section of this argument examines the discursive production of the racial body in Morrison's texts. I suggest that this demonstrates the necessity of going beyond designations of essentialism versus anti-essentialism in racial identity, through reference to feminist accounts of the body as the other of rationalism, and critical accounts of the construction of the racial body under the rational gaze, which therefore seek to challenge the violent binarism of naturalistic accounts of identity. Throughout this section I will examine the production of the racial body as an object of visibility, and the implications of the visibility of the racial body for the construction of identities on either side of the black / white binary. In particular, I will examine contested instances of the construction of the racial body as a source of violence, to suggest the implications of texts in which this logic is reversed and acts of violence usurp the location of identity. In this section, Morrison's short story "Recitatif," is approached through the motif of passing, suggested as an epistemological rupture in the discourse of visibility which confirms the racial identity of the body, and the resulting strategies by which this text resists the imposition of an authoritative gaze. This examination of the visibility of racial identity is continued in a reading of The Bluest Eye which highlights that novel's concern with the slippage between the image and the thing in the context of racial discrimination, and the desires which motivate attempts to close this slippage. In this novel, the textual deconstruction of visibility is relocated in the realm of the social and the power of the gaze to contextualise racial identity within the social is examined. Finally, Paradise is introduced to this argument as an analysis of the relationship between incoherently signalling racial bodies and the role of violence in securing racial identities as fixed limit cases.

Section two continues this examination of the construction of racial identity in the context of a distinct historical setting: the years of the mid-twentieth century and the struggles of the civil rights movement. Sula, Song of Solomon and Tar Baby are

therefore examined in relation to the production of narratives of national and racial belonging in the context of the United States, and the production of black American identity alongside ideologies of civic and racial nationalism. I focus in particular on the ways in which these novels allude to the violence of the state versus the violence of the individual in the context of war, to demonstrate the ways in which violence shapes the relationship of the individual to the state, and how these novels bring into question the possible meanings of individual acts of violence. In Sula, Shadrack's National Suicide Day brings the violence of war into the civic community, while Song of Solomon relates the politics of racial violence to the national context. Tar Baby, set at the far end of this historical period, is considered as a text of national identity set outside national boundaries, through an examination of the possibilities of multicultural identities and the relocation of national boundaries to the personal and interior through the submerged violence of rape.

Section three contains the longest and most detailed of my critical readings of Morrison's novels, and the paradigms of identity and violence and questions of historical context suggested in the previous sections return and contribute to my analysis of Beloved and Jazz as texts centred around decentred events of violence which put into question the relationships of force which structure American society. While Jazz questions the possibility of a narrative structure which can do justice to the events of the novel, I argue that in both texts the possibility of 'doing justice' is put into question. In my interpretation of Beloved's central event of violence, I argue that the possible meanings of Sethe's act cannot be contained within the structure of the law, and that this is in part a result of her simultaneous position under the law of slavery and the law of liberal humanism. By examining the relationship between Sethe's act and the laws which seek to judge her act, I seek to show that the nature of this violent event cannot be contained within the drive to judgment without the revelation of the limitations of judgment, and to suggest that this account of violence has serious implications for the role of violence in social relations.

1.

Representing Violence / Representing Identity

Throughout her work, Toni Morrison draws attention to the complexity of racial identity, in particular to what might be termed, in an apparently oxymoronic form, the question of intraracial racial difference. The frame of a national discourse of black / white difference is repeatedly invoked and the power of this vertical structure of difference on the national scene remains a constant presence. However, this presence is crucially marginalised by the close attention Morrison pays to the details of racial identity and the linguistic, imaginative, social and historical distinctions and gradations which are both products of and act to displace any monolithic structure of black / white racial difference. Further, these veils of identity are represented in the full complexity of their interrelation with issues of gender, class, age and other qualifying categories of difference.

The texts examined in this section are united by the problematisation of racial identity in the visual field, the location and delineation of a structure of visibility which refers to the racial body through the production of a discourse of the body as site of signifying racial differences. This discourse of the body then reveals the body not as source and stabilisation of racial knowledge, a material object which is anterior to its construction under the racialising gaze, but as the location for the inscription of racial meanings which bring the body as racial body into view. Therefore, the materiality of the body under discourses of racial identity is a materiality produced linguistically and through narrative, through a nominalising discourse which depends for its power upon a referent imagined as before or anterior to discourse but whose identity depends crucially upon the signification of differences whose origin is in discourses of race rather than the body under scrutiny. As racial identity is produced through the sign of the body, the

absence of the body itself forms a productive ambiguity within discourses of race which locate upon the site of the body meanings which form and deform the materiality of the racial body. As such, 'race' as a concept becomes both categorically empty and a powerful form of categorisation, identified by Morrison in her critical work as "the paradox of a powerfully destructive emptiness" (*Race-ing Justice* ix).

The texts examined in this section occlude or problematise the presence of the racial body as an object of the reader's gaze, recreating the racial body as a marked absence within the text, in the form of the non-disclosure of racial identity and the reduction of the apparent full presence of the racial body to the mythical signs of racial difference. This negation of the racial body as a site of appeal for meaning formation disrupts the racialising gaze and the gaze of the reader, raising questions about the relationship of power inaugurated by the rational gaze and the implicit violence of racial identification located by a gaze situated outside the subject. Further, in her representation of racially ambiguous or non-disclosing characters, Morrison replaces the anxiety normally associated with such apparent non-identities with an anxiety over the representation of violence through the problematic signification of the event of violence, the disruption of meaning through violence and the problematic representation of violence in the traumatic aftermath and in the absence of the violated body.

The discourse of nature in Western thought since the eighteenth century has been written through and has written upon themes of 'social' identity such as race, sexuality, gender, nation and class, and the status and imagery of 'the natural' remains a primary field of contestation in contemporary thought (Haraway 1). The scope of 'nature' as a subject in eighteenth century thought extends the field of thought on 'race' in this period far beyond the body as such: under the auspices of 'natural history' in the eighteenth century, the 'biology' of race extended to the psychological, moral and national, and hence physical features were perceived to be signs of other, less visible but no less meaningful, differences. Crucially, these differences continued to be understood as differences of race (Appiah 42-9). The essentialism of this view of race, which links necessary characteristics to inherent racial identities, was a central tenet of many discourses of race throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. This included

racially based theories of nationalism which link land, body and culture, and the scientific racism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where physiological classification recorded not only physical differences, but translated these differences into meaningful racial differences (Appiah 63, 73; Wiegman 28-29). Therefore the location of the meaning of race in the realm of the 'natural' signified by the physical body as representative of a category of being has always extended beyond the physical. As increasingly 'scientific,' as opposed to social, concepts of race developed, they have inherited a classificatory system of racial difference still marked by its development under eighteenth century concepts no longer appropriate to later models of identity. Within these scientific discourses, the identification of differences in physical features between races do not amount to significant differences (Appiah 73-4). Despite this development in scientific concepts of race, the belief that physical differences continue to signal not only themselves but also a significant racial difference continues to carry discursive power in contemporary cultures, and continues to operate under the sign of science. Indeed it is arguable that in the post-segregation United States, where discrimination on the basis of skin colour, as a material sign of racial difference, has become technically illegal, these ghostly 'other differences' signalled by physical difference but not contained within it and therefore not legislated against as such, have become of paramount importance (K. Williams, "Race, Reform" 553).

The continuity between the location of race within the natural and the construction of race as a social category demonstrates Diana Fuss' argument that the apparently logical opposition between essentialism and anti-essentialism must be deconstructed. Fuss questions the extent to which any position can maintain its claim to anti-essentialism, and yet situate itself as a position within a system of thought such as Western metaphysics, where the logic of essentialism may be irreducible even to systems of thought which attempt to oppose essentialism (2). Anti-essentialism within this argument is a position which continues to posit itself against an outside, an 'essentialised essentialism' which is made to bear the weight of problematic issues ejected from the discourse of anti-essentialism. Therefore the placement of 'race' as a term within discourses of the natural, or essential, or alternatively the social and anti-essential, does not guarantee either of these meanings, and in part this is a result of the structural role the concept of race has played within the construction of the Hegelian

dialectic foundational to the philosophy of consciousness in Western thought. As Robert Young argues in White Mythologies, the concept of race plays a foundational role in the construction of the 'Other' against which the rational self is delineated. The placement of the other within a binary relationship with the same recreates the other as the selfsame, and so violently negates knowledge of the other, or the possibility of the truly other. This creates a double-bind in the search for an oppositional identity within Western philosophy, by positioning the other either as a reflection (and therefore a part of) the same, or creating the other as the unknowable other, a position from which the other cannot effectively speak (6). Hence Derrida, in his critique of the primacy of binary division within Western philosophy identifies this not only as a "*logocentrism*" but also an "*ethnocentrism*" (Of Grammatology 3). If we strive towards an anti-essentialist approach to identity which can approach the possibility of difference, can we continue to talk about 'race', if race is not a thing 'in itself'? Alternatively, if we continue to use race as a category within which discourses of identity have been shaped, how can we mediate the apparent drive towards essentialism contained within such categories? As Michael Omi and Howard Winant suggest in Racial Formation in the United States, "There is a continuous temptation to think of race as an *essence*, as something fixed, concrete, and objective. And there is also an opposite temptation to imagine race as a mere *illusion*, a purely ideological construct which some ideal non-racist social order would eliminate. It is necessary to challenge both of these positions, to disrupt and reframe the rigid and bipolar manner in which they are posed and debated, and to transcend the presumably irreconcilable relationship between them" (54).

The history of the concept of race outlined above suggests that this problem of oppositional identity must be approached both through the question of the body and the question of language. Feminist theory argues that among the binary divisions of Western thought is the exclusion of the body in favour of the mind, an exclusion which works to celebrate the rational intellect as both the foundation of knowledge and the confirmation of the objectivity of that knowledge. Yet, as feminism reminds us, such a hierarchy of mind and body in Western thought does not simply exclude or erase the body. Rather, the body operates as the margin of the rational, and the body, rather than disappearing within this formulation, always returns to mark the outside of thought

(Price and Shildrik 2). As a result, those marked by the body and figured by bodily presence are also those excluded from the centres of Western discourse, and this includes both women, marked by gender difference, and non-white peoples, marked by racial difference. Rather than rejecting the body as the 'merely natural' or celebrating the body as a site of difference (another form of naturalism), theories of embodiment put forward by feminist theorists attempt to recognise the double bind in which the body is placed by Western philosophy, and so find ways to think the body which respond both to the materiality of the body and the construction of the body through various and competing discourses. To quote Denise Riley, "'the body', is not, for all its corporeality, an originary point nor yet a terminus; it is a result or an effect" (102), and in this reading, both the corporeality of the body and its status as 'an effect' retain significance. The material differences of bodies invoked in the discourse of race must, under theories of embodiment, be seen as a discursive effect, produced through the reiteration of normative subjects and subject positions of racial identity.¹ Hence the move towards 'embodiment' is not simply a move away from the body as physical reality, but a further demonstration of the ways in which the 'body' in racial theory is always already a body in representation, rather than the 'truth' of the body. While the focus of meaning may move from the *physicality* of the body, the *imagery* of the body, the now racialised rather than racial body, remains in play. While we may no longer argue the biological determinism of race, we must continue to uncover the work of meaning construction carried out by racial imagery, and this imagery continues to include imagery of the body.

The reiterative construction of racial identity through modes of discourse which embody racial difference invokes a language of race which has implications for any attempt to re-write or reinscript racial identity in oppositional ways. Identity under the order of Western rationality not only requires orders of difference through which difference can be ascribed and prescribed, but also a language which registers these differences and which institutes the iterability of race as such. Richard Bernstein, reading Derrida's "Racism's Last Word" on the language of apartheid, suggests that:

there is no racism without language. The point is not that acts of racial violence are only words, but rather that they have to have a word. Even though it offers the excuse of blood, color, birth - or rather, because it

¹ See Judith Butler Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'. This argument will be examined in more detail below.

uses naturalistic and sometimes creationist discourse - racism always betrays the perversion of man, the 'talking animal.' It institutes, declares, writes, inscribes, prescribes. A system of marks, it outlines in order to assign forced residence or to close off borders. It does not discern. It discriminates. (181)

Such a reading of the relationship between race, racism and language forces us to question the possibility of a language of racial difference which 'discerns' but does not 'discriminate'; which can designate difference while remaining outside the violent binarism of the philosophy of identity.

Attempts to place, or displace, race as a concept through alternative discursive strategies have occurred in work collected under the terms of multiculturalism and ethnicity studies. Werner Sollors' Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture acts as a useful example. Sollors' stated aim is to reread American literary history, to rewrite an American canon which represents the diversity of American history and society. In this new literary history, race is but one difference among many: "I think it is most helpful not to be confused by the heavily charged term 'race' and to keep looking at race as one aspect of ethnicity" (39). In Sollors' America, everyone is 'ethnic' and takes part in the "voluntary ethnicity" (33) which makes up the distinguishing experience of American society, where identity is not national and inherited, but formed through a system of "consent and descent." Although Sollors acknowledges that not every ethnic position is open to all, the emphasis this places on freedom to construct identities that disrupt a single line of descent necessarily displaces the specific history of race, which would radically disrupt this notion of freedom by bringing into question American identities founded neither on descent nor consent but on forceful extraction from other nations,² and a number of African American critics have noted with disquiet attempts to negate what is seen as essentialist racial rhetoric by the effacement of the term 'race' or 'racial' with the alternative vocabularies of identity and culture.³ Sollors' conception of "consent and descent" implies a voluntarist subject whose identity is a combination of the selection of inherited traits allied to an

² It is also notable that Sollors' conception of ethnicity as including and beyond race allows him to focus on ethnicity defined largely as national and religious difference, which in turn allows specific attention to be paid to a range of white / European identities. Conversely, the same weight of attention is not paid to differentiated 'black' ethnicities.

³ see for example work by African American critics such as bell hooks "Postmodern Blackness" Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics; Michael Awkward Negotiating Difference; K. Anthony Appiah Color Conscious; Cornel West Race Matters.

artful self-construction of identity, a conception of constructionism which discounts and displaces issues of power and normativity within such constructions. Therefore these 'new terms' of identity which seek to discern rather than discriminate risk not only silencing discrimination already at work within contemporary culture, but also rendering such discrimination unspeakable through the erasure of the "linguistic scene" (Butler, *Speech* 30) through which discrimination continues to work, elsewhere.⁴

Multiculturalism, like ethnicity, claims to replace the violence of race with a diversity or plurality of identity within which multiple cultural identities can be possible. And like ethnicity, I would suggest that multiculturalism is problematic in that it seeks to efface race while continuing to operate through the terms in which race has previously been defined. This does not simply mean the replication of racial divisions as cultural divisions, though this is an issue, as shown in the discussion of ethnicity above: rather, multiculturalism and ethnicity continue to operate as hegemonic structures whose apparent content and integral meaning continue to obscure specific meanings of racial difference in specific contexts. In this way, multiculturalism does not simply run the danger of constructing identities falsely, but also through its investment in the notion of the 'beyond' endangers the very plurality it claims to support. As Samira Kawash argues in her study of representations of hybridity and identity in American literature:

the narrative of the beyond - beyond identity, beyond race, beyond racism - is in many ways a revision of the Enlightenment narrative of the universal subject which gradually sheds all particularity and contingency to emerge into the light of its true being, with the signal difference that this has now been recast as essentially hybrid rather than essentially singular. (20)

Hence, multiculturalism, as the representation of the Many, collapses back into the representation of the One, and a culture of diversity remains a singular culture and

⁴ Tzvetan Todorov states this argument at greater length: "The term 'race', having already outlived its usefulness, will be replaced by the much more appropriate term 'culture'; declarations of superiority and inferiority, the residue of an attachment to a universalist framework, will be set aside in favour of a glorification of difference (a difference that is not valorised in itself). What will remain unchanged, on the other hand, is the rigidity of determinism (cultural rather than physical, now) and the discontinuity of humanity compartmentalised into cultures that cannot and must not communicate with each other effectively. The period of classical racism seems definitely behind us now... Modern racialism, which is better known as 'culturalism'... replaces physical race with linguistic, historical or psychological race. It shares certain features with its ancestor, but not all; this has allowed it to abandon the compromising term 'race' (and thus the first 'proposition' of classical racism). Nevertheless, it can continue to play the role formerly assumed by racialism. In our day, racist behaviours have clearly not disappeared, or even changed, but the discourse that legitimates them is no longer the same; rather than appealing to racialism, it appeals to nationalist or culturalist doctrine, or to the 'right to difference'" (70).

operates through a cultural hegemony which continues to posit assimilation as the solution to the problems of race (Omi and Winant, Racial Formation 13).

Frantz Fanon's celebrated essay "The Fact of Blackness" draws attention to the inequalities of power which operate at the level of recognition through the construction of a position beyond identity which recognises itself through other identities. The opening of the essay replays this argument dramatically: "'Dirty Nigger!'" Or simply, 'Look, a Negro!'" (Black Skin 109). Fanon's identity is inscribed by the gaze and voice of the white colonist, and this inscription precedes his own words, his own self description. Fanon's textual reaction is violent: "I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart" (109). Significantly, this violence, this breaking and restructuring, take place only on one side of the object / subject relationship; there is no reciprocal violence felt on the part of the white observer. Fanon reads this relationship as the imposition of perpetual object status on those positioned as black within white discourse:

For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. (110)

Identity in Fanon's dramatic reconstruct is not achieved through the individualisation of the Enlightenment ideal which suggests a voluntarist subject empowered with the knowledge of their own identity, but through a process of identification which historicises the Lacanian mirror stage through the incursion of race into the primal scene.⁵ Following Fanon, Diana Fuss argues that

identification has a history - a colonial history; [...] this colonial history poses serious challenges for contemporary recuperations of a politics of identification. [...] [I]f we are to begin to understand both its political usages and its conceptual limitations, the notion of identification must be placed squarely within its other historical genealogies, including colonial imperialism. (20)

She continues, "identification is neither a historically universal concept nor a politically innocent one. A by-product of modernity, the psychoanalytic theory of identification takes shape within a larger cultural context of colonial expansion and imperial crisis"

⁵ In his essay "The Mirror and the Veil: The Passing Novel and the Quest for American Racial Identity," John Sheehy highlights the historicisation of this process of identification in early twentieth century literature by African American writers, particularly James Weldon Johnson's Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man which describes the realisation of race by the narrator as the search for a mirror (both literal and metaphorical) which will accurately reflect, and so stabilise, his identity (403).

(20). Fuss allies this sociohistorical reading of identification to an account of the inherent alienation effect of the construction of identity through a relationship between the self and the Other, arguing that the reliance upon the Other as a reflection of the self which is both the same and not-same makes self-identification inherently unstable - the Other must be at once incorporated and repudiated. Fanon's account of the colonial situation in Algeria, Fuss argues, demonstrates that this alienation effect, in the colonial situation, results in unequal access to the position of selfhood in terms of racial identity:

‘white’ defines itself through a powerful and illusory *fantasy* of escaping the exclusionary practices of psychical identity formation. The coloniser projects what might be called identification’s ‘alienation effect’ onto the colonised, who is enjoined to identify and to disidentify simultaneously with the same object, to assimilate but not to incorporate, to approximate but not to displace. Further, in attempting to claim alterity entirely as its own, the Imperial Subject imposes upon all others, as a condition of the subjugation, an injunction to *mime* alterity. The colonized are constrained to impersonate the image the colonizer offers them of themselves: they are commanded to imitate the colonizer’s version of their essential difference. (Fuss 24)

In effect, the role of whiteness in the construction of identity, through racial identification, is to displace ‘race’, and so difference, onto a position of non-whiteness. This is not a demonstration of the *misuse* of identification, or a faulty identification under colonial rule, but that ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ are positioned differently in relation to the identity of race. In effect, ‘race’ only occurs in the presence of racial difference, and ‘racial difference’ can only occur in the presence of non-whiteness.

Critical work which addresses the issue of white identity as an identity under the discourse of race rather than of ethnicity has focused on several key areas, including the need to establish white identity as racial, and more specifically as racial *in relation to* non-white identities. This can be distinguished from work on white ethnicity which suggests an internal coherence to ethnic identity which fails to take into account the processes of differentiation and opposition involved in the formation of racial identities.

An example of this racialisation and resituation of whiteness, and a turn to the specific context the United States and US literature, can be seen if we examine Toni Morrison’s collection of essays on “whiteness and the literary imagination,” Playing in the Dark. Here, Morrison resituates classic United States literary texts to reveal the racial discourse that operates within them, highlighting the strategic part that race has played in the construction of ‘white’ (read ‘non-raced’) literature. This reveals the construction of race within these texts, a construction she names “American

Africanism” which describes “the denotative and connotative Blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people” (6-7).

Morrison’s move to locate the operation of race within and as part of white discourse reveals the construction and confirmation of knowledges about ‘Africanist’ peoples through literature and the possibility of the racialisation of whiteness through the reinscription of a speaking black presence. As Ruth Frankenberg argues,

Naming ‘whiteness’ displaces it from the unmarked, unnamed status that is itself an effect of its dominance. Among the effects on white people both of race privilege and of the dominance of whiteness are their seeming normativity, their structural invisibility. (451)

To reconstitute and revisualise this structural invisibility, white identity must be written as a racial identity rather than the norm from which other identities differ, not in an effort to find a racial essence in white identity, but to recognise racial identity as a process of differentiation.

However, I would argue that we must go further than the racialisation of whiteness to combat this “structural invisibility,” and although the racialisation of whiteness in itself suggests an inequality (whiteness having not previously been seen as racial), this inequality itself must be explored. Despite the often specific interrelation of white / black racial meanings, where identification is constructed through opposition, this should not suggest that ‘black’ and ‘white’ are positions of equivalence, either in terms of the access black and white actors have to defining their own racial meanings, as Fuss suggests, or in the way in which the concept of race operates in modes of whiteness or blackness (Dyer 18). By this I mean to suggest that blackness and whiteness are not positioned in equivalent or reciprocal relationships to the concept of race; ‘race’, in terms of whiteness, does not function in the same way as ‘race’ in terms of blackness. Racial inequality, then, is not incidental to the concept of race, but structural in white Western culture. This can be seen if we examine Fanon’s argument, above, more closely. In his claim that “the Black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man,” Fanon identifies the objectification of black subjecthood under white systems of definition, emblemised by the child’s words “ ‘Dirty Nigger!’ ” or “ ‘a Negro.’ ” Through this objectification, the apparently reciprocal relationship of black / white racial differentiation becomes one-sided: the ‘white man’, in this formulation, cannot be put in the place of the black man, because objectification

depends upon holding a particular place in the system of racial identification. Once again, this objectification is related to the location of racial identity in the body. As Richard Dyer suggests:

All concepts of *race*, emerging out of eighteenth-century materialism, are concepts of bodies, but all along they have had to be reconciled with notions of embodiment and incarnation. The latter become what distinguish white people, giving them a special relation to race. Black people can be reduced (in white culture) to their bodies and thus to race, but white people are something else that is realised in and yet not reducible to the corporeal, or racial. (14-5)

While this identification with the body locates blackness as present, observable and identifiable, whiteness is identified with absence: “Whiteness as an ideal can never be attained, not only because white skin can never be hue white, but because ideally white is absence: to be really, absolutely white is to be nothing” (Dyer 78).

However, as recent work by Patricia McKee has noted (American Races 1-30), to define blackness as presence and whiteness as absence, particularly as an unrepresentable and therefore potentially disempowering absence, once again goes too far in suggesting an equivalence of positions. The stabilisation of blackness as presence and whiteness as absence runs the risk of suggesting that each position, in its own way, is a source of loss for those identified under the headings ‘black’ or ‘white.’ Notably, this replicates early arguments on racial identity, particularly by white liberal critics, which sought to suggest that the relation between blackness and presence was actually a positive relationship, which empowered black identity and subjectivity, and suggested a black access to ‘the real’ which was denied to whites. This argument not only risks the reification of blackness as object (Abel, ‘Black Writing’), but also neglects the power of a white identity which can position itself as both object *and* subject, which, as McKee argues, is the result of white domination of modes of representation.⁶ To be a producer *and* an object of representation within a group is a position of power, because this indicates the possibility of moving from one position to the other, or inhabiting both at once, therefore being open to more than one view and therefore seen as more than

⁶ This may appear the run counter to the argument Morrison makes in Playing in the Dark, where she emphasises the dynamism of ideas of blackness in American culture, an argument which does appear to locate a ‘reality’ in images of blackness lacking in white culture. However, I would emphasise that her argument relates largely to the representation of blackness *in white culture*, and the projection of ‘American Africanism’ that has resulted from the place ideas of blackness hold in white literature which includes blackness as a motor of action or movement. Hence, the powerful presence found in the images of blackness she describes are very much projections of white representation rather than signs of an authentic black culture.

simply one individual. Therefore, to say that men are subjects and women are objects (for example) is not enough - even in patriarchal discourse, men are both objects and subjects - it is their freedom to move from one category to another, through the departicularisation of their identities, which is a source of power (McKee, American Races 14-16). McKee demonstrates her argument by considering the relationship between whiteness and ideas of the public. Whiteness is represented as abstract and as general, while non-white identities are specific and particular. This allows whiteness access to the claim of a non-racial position- whiteness as not racially motivated because it claims non-selfinterestedness through this link to the public. Hence, the public is represented and objectified in ways which claim to avoid racial bias, but which, through the dominance of white culture, *are* representations of whiteness. Therefore, to take claims of whiteness as absence at face value is to fail to recognise the ways in which representations of 'the public' in white dominated cultures are in fact also representations of whiteness through their exclusion of non-whiteness; this white public sphere is not available to all equally, and the abstraction gained through discourses of whiteness is only available as a differential resource, located through the presence of nonwhite others (American Races 9). "Otherness' becomes a constituent of the abstract ideal rather than left out of it" (American Races 13).

To quote Richard Dyer, "since race in itself - insofar as it is anything in itself - refers to some intrinsically insignificant geographical / physical differences between people, it is the *imagery* of race that is in play" (12, emphasis added). Race, in this formulation, no longer has meaning "in itself." However, this move away from essentialism cannot be read as necessarily a step towards anti-essentialism; anti-essentialism, the step beyond the limit of identity as such, cannot be assumed to be the result of attempts to read racial essentialism critically. The persistence of the colour-line, as Kawash notes,

is not a problem of false consciousness or anachronistic thinking; rather, it indicates the power and continuity of the cognitive, discursive, and institutional workings of the color line as simultaneously the limit and constitutive condition for cultural and social life. (6)

Racial discourse, or a 'body of knowledge' on race, can be seen in a range of social discourses including literature, sociology, history and politics, and if America remains a

racialised society, as I think we must admit that it does, then the discourse of race remains a “social fact” (Winant 183). To be without a racial identity, in this society, is to be without an identity at all.⁷ The representation of race in these discourses, even when recognised *as representation*, continues to construct a ‘truth’ of race, even if this truth is now situated in a multitude of overlapping, heterogeneous positions in language.

The truth of race is not apparent, natural race identities that form the foundation of social order; rather, it is the possibility that any apparent truth is *not* true, that because race is a *nothing*, it can never in fact be what it appears to be. (Kawash 164)

Crucially, we cannot overestimate the impact of theoretical interventions into these discourses of race, and we must bear in mind that no ‘ledger’ publicly records the deconstruction of binary oppositions (Elam 21). Further, racial discourse has never been a singular, unified and coherent subject; although potentially organised in terms of political strategy and towards the end of maintaining a racial hierarchy, it is the constitutive ambiguity of racial discourse that has provided its operational usefulness to contestants in inter-racial conflict.⁸ This is the situation recognised in K. Anthony Appiah’s claim that “the ‘label’ of race “works despite the absence of an essence” (82). Race, then, is a palimpsest, composed of multiple histories of meaning and multiple contexts of meaning, yet one which also has real social effects and which remains in danger of a slippage towards facticity. As a result, however much we may wish to question race, or ‘race’, as an identity, we cannot simply chose to stop ‘doing’ race, as though race as a category has only recently come into play (with the advent of critical discourses which challenges the white majority): as Michael Awkward notes, race as a category has always also been a critical fact in the work of the white mainstream (Negotiations” 582). Indeed, to suggest that the edifice of racial discourse could be displaced by the revelation that ‘race’ may not be ‘true’ may place too much faith in the idea that racial discourse was founded on the truth of race in the first place.

⁷ This may seem contrary to the notion that ‘white’ acts as a non-racialised position in mainstream discourse. However, I would argue that in the context of American society, white may not be racialised ‘as white’, but identifies itself through a majority (or centre) position where race is an important marker in identifying the Other, and therefore the Self.

⁸ For a discussion of ‘constitutive instability’, in a different context, see Penelope Deutscher, *Yielding Gender*. In the context of race, I take her suggestion that constitutive instability both stabilises and destabilises a discourse as a useful way of registering the operational rather than essential nature of racial discourse.

**The non-disclosure of race and the non-representability of violence in
“Recitatif”**

If, as suggested above, the explanatory power of the concept of race leads to the overdetermination of racial identity in the presence of the racially identifiable body, the attempt to read race through the concept of race, rather than the construction of the concept, leads to a unending multiplication of our knowledges of race in an attempt to reach ‘the end’ of race. Here I wish to explore an alternative representation of racial identity, through a reading of Toni Morrison’s short story, “Recitatif,” a text which is at once conventional in terms of its narrative, but structurally experimental in terms of the presence of racial difference. I want to suggest that reading “Recitatif” suggests new ways of reading race which focus on the construction of identity, the role of the reader as the invisible point at which identity construction takes place within the text, and the disruption of the unequal construction of identity in the context of race and racial difference. Further, through the non-disclosure of racial identity, “Recitatif” restages the drama of difference by replacing the constructive power of theories of racial identity with the problematic of representations of violence.

“Recitatif” focuses on a series of meetings between two female characters, one black, one white, at several stages in their life, moving from a shared childhood in a state institution to conflict and reconciliation as adults. The racial difference of the characters is made clear from the beginning, when the narrator, Twyla, describes her new roommate Roberta as “a girl from a whole other race” (210), and later looks back on their relationship as one between “A black girl and a white girl” (218). However, the actual identity of each, as black or white, remains concealed through the text’s refusal to make explicit the skin colour of either character. This non-disclosure of racial identity in what Judith Butler describes as a “linguistic scene” (*Speech* 30) that explicitly includes a discourse of racial difference constructs racial identity as an ambivalent absent presence which confounds the iterability of identity. By this textual omission, Morrison is able to comment effectively on the overdetermined operation of race in forming identity in the

presence of racial difference.

Race, and the difference of race, marks the relationship between the characters in crucial ways; conflict between them arises from apparently 'racial' issues such as the integration of segregated schools, cultural separatism and their shared relationship to an indeterminately raced figure in their past. By removing the reassuring markers of black and white physicalities through which racial identity would normally be settled, Morrison reveals the extent to which differences potentially read as racial may also be read through other discourses of difference, particularly class. Through this, the explanatory power of 'race' as an identity is questioned. In adulthood, Twyla lives an apparently working-class existence, her husband is a fireman, and the couple live in a neighbourhood alongside his extended family. Roberta, meanwhile, displays the trappings of wealth and success with a chauffeur driven car, expensive clothes and expensive tastes. When the two meet, Twyla's reaction reads, "Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world" (217). This statement reduces Roberta to a social identity, as one of "them," figured as those with privileges, yet we cannot securely separate the possibility of racial privilege from class privilege in Twyla's reading of Roberta's status (Abel 103). As Morrison notes in her introduction to the essay collection Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power, such constructions of identity through membership of the 'group' have had historical implications for representations of blackness in white American society.

In a society with a history of trying to accommodate both slavery and freedom, and a present that wishes both to exploit and to deny the pervasiveness of racism, black people are rarely individuated.[...] Without individuation, without nonracial perception, black people, as a group, are used to signify the polar opposites of love and repulsion. (xiv-xv)

In "Recitatif" the denial of disclosure of the applicability of the group identities of 'black' and 'white' at once resists the denial of individuation to black people, and insists upon the role racial identities may play in individuation in an American scene in which points of reference (and in particular points of conflict) between the two main characters insistently but problematically signify their potentially racial nature. The productive absence of disclosed racial identity in the text then comes to stand as race writ large, as a tempting emptiness which reveals, rather than concealing, its abyssal nature.

Not only does the text reveal the temptation of identification offered by the presence of racial difference, but it also locates the desire for such identity construction in the reader, rather than among characters in the text itself. I want to examine this through the trope of 'passing:' passing from, or for, one race to another. While the notion of passing disrupts straightforward racial identifications - the identity of an individual must first be in question - passing does not in itself necessarily disrupt racial discourse. As K. Anthony Appiah points out, "The very concept of passing implies that, if the relevant fact about the ancestry of these individuals had become known, most people would have taken them to be travelling under the wrong badge" (76-7). To construct racial identity as one that passes for another continues to posit an underlying, 'true' but concealed, identity. However, the notion of passing is illuminating, and I think potentially disruptive, when read in terms of the identification of racial identity rather than racial essence, and in relation to the ways in which passing's traditional exposition reveals the unequal relations of racial discourse in the United States. By using passing as a motif through which to read "Recitatif," I hope to uncover the ways in which racial identity, though stable in terms of the characters' perceptions of themselves and each other, is radically disrupted for the reader. In effect, racial passing is performed not by one character to another, but by the text to the reader. In addition, the text disrupts the normative reading of passing as 'passing for white' by rendering white identity unstable.

In many accounts of passing, the subject of passing has been anxiety over the identification of racially mixed people, or rather of bodies whose racially mixed origins can no longer be physically detected.⁹ Again, this points to a reinscription of racial authenticity - there is 'something' to be detected - and in this context, 'white purity' has always been privileged over 'black purity.' However, within this essentialising discourse, a rupture does occur between the body as site and guarantee of racial identity and the possibility of a racially mixed body that no longer signifies clearly or coherently within this system of identification: there is a collapse in continuity between 'appearing' and 'being' which must force us to ask how being is constituted. This rupture goes beyond the case of the racially mixed body to the centre of racial identity and

⁹ It should be noted that for the purposes of this discussion I am privileging aspects of passing related to the conceptual construction of identity. In many instances, passing in black literature is not simply concerned with the possibility of changing racial identities, but also with segregation, economic discrimination and class difference constructed on racial lines.

identification. Kawash states the point thus:

The very visibility of blackness, a visibility that seems so commonsensical in the modern world as to need no explanation, is itself a part of, not prior to, the epistemology of racial difference. If the figure of passing challenges the principles and the power of this racial epistemology, then the implications of this challenge are not limited only to those in between. (134)

By revealing the privilege of visibility in the construction of racial identity, the possibility of the passing figure performs an epistemological rupture within knowledges of race precariously guaranteed by this system of visible signs. As Amy Robinson, in an essay on passing narratives and community identity, suggests: “Within a Western metaphysical tradition that has naturalised visibility as the locus of ontological truth-claims about the subject, vision masquerades as the agent of unmediated facticity” (719). Passing denaturalises this function of visibility as guarantor of ‘truth’ and refocuses attention not only on the nature of visibility as such, but on the perspective from which the visible is viewed. Once again, the critical value of passing here is its focus upon the problem of identity, or ‘facticity’, *as viewed*.

Within traditional literary accounts of racial passing, the gap between the viewer and their unstable visual objects is closed by the device of the ‘tell,’ a physical signal available to the informed spectator, which (re)orders and stabilises racial identity by realigning bodily and ideological definitions of race. While discussing narratives of passing in Neither Black Nor White Yet Both, Werner Sollors recounts many such instances of this, including a usefully representative quotation from Victor Hugo’s Bug-Jargal. Discussing a racially ambiguous character, the narrator confides that “We are assured, however, that there is always perceptible on a particular part of the body the ineffaceable trace of its origins” (Sollors Neither 120). This ‘trace’ provides a link to an origin in an oppressed group which cannot be overcome, and which continues to render the individual a part of the group.¹⁰

As this demonstrates, narratives of passing are ultimately narratives of failures to

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that by focusing his attention on a wide range of American and European literature, Sollors necessarily examines mainly white-authored texts. In a number of black-authored fictions, such as Nella Larsen’s Passing, there is no such confidence in the idea of the tell, particularly as far as its application to white observers goes. Larsen’s narrator notes that she repeatedly passes in white-only areas with no danger of detection and specifically dismisses the visual signals alleged to reveal her true identity. Similarly, the ability of a member of an insider community, such as the black community, is often related to their shared membership (at some time) of that community, rather than a sign located in an abstract racial body (Robinson 726).

pass, even if this failure is only recognised by the “in-group” (Robinson 715) who may have consented with and supported the passing individual. This failure to pass, which involves the acknowledgment of an identity which, if not necessarily ‘black,’ is ‘not-white,’ is the necessary condition and operative contradiction of passing. In “Recitatif” Morrison rewrites the terms of passing to create a ‘successful’ pass. The reader is specifically situated by the text as a reader of racial ambiguity whose always only partial knowledge of the ‘truth’ of racial identity in the text ultimately frustrates any search for a racial ‘truth,’ or a ‘tell,’ which will disclose this truth, no matter how skilled the reader (Abel 102-8).¹¹

Therefore, racial identity is disrupted because, against traditional narratives of passing, the reader is no longer privileged with access to reassuring knowledge of racial identity, even if this identity is put into question. In addition, by turning attention away from the characters (who themselves are in secure possession of their own racial identities) the text highlights the role of the reader as an active agent in constructing (rather than recognising) racial identity, and in particular in constructing racial identity on the basis of visible signs of race. As noted above, many aspects of the characters in the text *could* be attributed to racial difference, but in the absence of a consoling confirmation of colour difference, these potential indicators of identity are radically destabilised and denaturalised in terms of racial meaning. Through its presentation of racially ambiguous characters, “Recitatif” dislodges white identity from its un-marked, non-racial position. Throughout traditional narratives of passing, passing is almost always a transition from a black identity to a ‘perceived-as’ white identity, where ‘black’ stands also for mixed race identities, as famously demonstrated in the ‘one drop’ rule. Therefore the discourse of passing functions not on the possibility of passing from a black identity to a white identity, but in fact on the impossibility of this transition, even if this failure is only private (in the reader’s knowledge of the character) rather than public.

¹¹ A significant aspect of Abel’s argument must be examined here. Her highly influential reading of “Recitatif” informs my reading at many points, but I disagree with her strategy of restabilising identity within the text through recourse to an extratextual (and unprinted) communication with Morrison as author. Because her reading of the text is centrally concerned with the appropriation of black-authored texts by white critics, Abel’s analysis of her own and others’ responses to the text require the confirmation of racial identities within the text to confirm, in the end, whether these readings are ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ or as she concludes “right for the wrong reasons” (107). By turning to the *deus-ex-machina* of Morrison’s intention, I would suggest that Abel’s critical desire stabilises her reading of race in the texts in ways which are not dissimilar to the appropriation of racial meaning she seeks to avoid by suggesting that the question of race can only be solved through the category of race, rather than the contestation of this category.

Hence the 'tell' which marks the limits of racial discourse in traditional narratives of passing acts as a signifier for the impossibility of the truly passing body - the body which is not 'passing' but has passed and is no longer in question. Hence the impossibility of passing is not of moving from a black identity to a white identity, but of moving from a racial identity to a non-racial identity. The presumption of whiteness inherent in passing narratives is undone, and yet not replaced by a presumption of blackness, because the structure of identification cannot simply be reversed.

Therefore, not only does the text undermine the 'natural attitude' (Bryson 25) of visibility, but highlights the nature of the relationship between looking and being looked at as a function of power. Like the gaze of the white observer in passing literature whose recognition of the all but invisible 'tell' enforces its significance, or the gaze of the white husband in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, whose knowledge of his wife's origins recreates her as 'black' despite her physical and visible whiteness (Butler, *Bodies* 171), the reader of the racially ambiguous text constructs race within the text. This is not only an 'act of reading,' but also a function of the naturalised visibility of race. By refusing to legitimate the reader's power to close the question of race in "Recitatif," Morrison inverts the relationship of power between the viewer and the viewed.

Foucault's description of the panopticon is instructive here. The panopticon represents the imposition of discipline through the organisation of the visible, and while it creates subjects, these subjects are individuals only under the discipline of the gaze, and only in relationship with the guard, as the controller of that gaze. Within this order, "visibility is a trap" (Foucault, *Discipline* 200). The act of looking within this order of visibility is entirely one-sided: the object of the disciplinary gaze must be constantly visible and under surveillance, but at the same time unable to confirm the presence of any watcher. As a result, while the inhabitant of the panopticon is individualised and constantly available for scrutiny, the guard is abstract and invisible; "He (the prisoner) is seen, but he does not see; he is an object of information, never a subject in communication" (200). One result of this organisation of the visible is that power is disseminated because the unseen viewer cannot be individualised, and the panopticon as a structure "automatizes and disindividualises power" (202). A second result is that the panopticon demands not only the possibility of an absolute visibility, but also that what is observed within the structure of the panopticon can be made meaningful: hence its

role in the imposition of order. The structure of “Recitatif” can be seen as one which absolutely inverts the panopticon, and questions the meaningfulness of observations made under such a system of discipline. Through its frustration of the possibility of absolute visibility, “Recitatif” negates the reader’s attempts to impose discipline upon the text. As a result, the gaze of the panopticon is reversed; through the invisibility of the racial identity of the characters, the gaze is turned back upon the reader, a move which undoes the structural invisibility of the reader. At the same time, the overwhelming visibility of race (read ‘blackness’) in traditional passing narratives is negated.¹² The inversion of relationships of viewing and being viewed results in a version of the “ontological perspectivism” Brian McHale associates with the postmodern text, where an “opalescence” of the text frustrates the process of reconstruction of the world of the text by the reader (39). By reversing the trajectory of ontological power, “Recitatif” also undermines the criminalising function of the panopticon where the authoritative gaze demands not only the right to look, but also the inadmissibility of non-disclosure, the demand for confession. This is also the demand the authoritative reader makes of the text, and the refusal of the text to answer this demand could be construed as a crime against the desire of the reader.

Therefore, “Recitatif” constructs a textual blind spot whose invisibility makes visible the authoritative gaze of the reader and whose non-disclosure of racial identity reveals the source of the criminalising power of the panopticon as the desire of the reader to locate racial identity within the text. As a result of the representation of race as a non-disclosed and “flickering” (McHale 39) presence under the gaze of the reader rather than between characters in the text whose points of view we variously share and discard, “Recitatif” also shifts the anxiety associated with the passing figure from the text to the reader.

“Recitatif” is structured around a series of meetings between the main characters and these meetings are repeatedly characterised by conflict. A significant episode concerns a protest over the integration of schools attended by the characters’ children, where Twyla and Roberta find themselves on opposing picket lines. “Strife

¹² It is also arguable that the images of the plague used by Foucault as the motor for the discipline imposed by the panopticon are comparable to slavery and segregation era fears of miscegenation among white communities in the US, and the proliferation of registers of racial identity and the development of formulas such as the ‘one-drop’ rule can certainly be seen as attempts to make visible, and so controllable, problematic racial identities.

came to us that fall. At least that's what the paper called it. Strife. Racial strife" (220).

Twyla reimagines 'racial strife' as a predatory creature with a life of its own:

Racial strife. The word made me think of a bird - a big shrieking bird out of 1,000,000,000 B.C. Flapping its wings and cawing. Its eye with no lid always bearing down on you. All day it screeched and at night it slept on the rooftops. It woke you in the morning, and from the *Today* show to the eleven o'clock news it kept you an awful company. (220)

This disturbing image of conflict is mediated through its identification as racial, yet Twyla's reimagining of the terms of the conflict dislocates the events from any conventional sense of race, and this reinscription of the terms of the conflict over the school and between herself and Roberta is a constant feature of Twyla's language use which promotes a personal and intercommunicative model over the modes of normative and authoritative language favoured by Roberta. Twyla repeatedly calls on the personal language of their shared past, through terms such as "gar girls" (218) and "Bozos" (221) while Roberta translates these ideas into the language of psychology, the official discourse of personality order / disorder, suggesting that Twyla has 'blocked' her memories and that "Those girls had behaviour problems" (219), or identifying the protesting "Bozos" as "just mothers" (221). The dialogic relationship between their languages also emerges in the signs they carry on the protests: Roberta is initially seen carrying a placard which reads "MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO!" (220), implying the absent referent of the civil rights movement.¹³ When Twyla joins the picket line she brings a series of her own signs which respond literally and personally to Roberta's, the first reading "AND SO DO CHILDREN*****" (222), the next, commenting on Roberta's own absent mother, "HOW WOULD YOU KNOW?" (222). The 'absent referent' of Twyla's signs is present in Roberta's presence, a fact Twyla takes for granted but which in fact disrupts communication far more than the distance between Roberta's sign and its communicant political discourse. Twyla lacks a community in the sense that her signs cannot be interpreted or interpellated as a position within normative political discourse (Butler, *Speech* 33-4). Twyla's signmaking refuses to conform to the laws of political protest where political demands are made on an abstract authority, and her signs function as art as well as protest (223). Like the incoherently signifying bodies of the main characters which cannot be transformed in communicative surfaces, Twyla's

¹³ On adoption of civil right rhetoric by other political movements see bell hooks *Ain't I A Woman* and Joy James *Transcending the Talented Tenth*.

signs refuse the reification of the body as text within the political sphere. Her disjunctive signs relate to an absent referent which transforms their political communicative function into the indirection of art. When Twyla leaves the demonstration, it is not because her side has been victorious, but because Roberta's withdrawal has made her presence nonsensical. "Two days later I stopped going too and couldn't have been missed because nobody understood my signs anyway" (223).

Just as Twyla's signs mark a refusal to conform to the codes of political communication, Twyla's entry into the dispute is not motivated by the officially sanctioned significance of race, but propelled through a confrontation with Roberta, where Roberta once again constructs their personal conflict in terms of political difference, accusing Twyla of attacking an old black lady when she was a child, an act which marks her not as violent as such, but as a bigot, a perpetrator of specifically racial violence (222). This event concerns Maggie, an employee of the Children's Home first encountered in the orchard, initially and with retrospective irony introduced as a place where "Nothing really happened [...]. Nothing all that important, I mean" (211). Maggie is an elderly mute woman who is "old and sandy-colored" (211). This is the only mention of skin colour in the story, yet Maggie's identity is racially undecidable and the nature of her racial identity becomes a question of increasing concern throughout the story. Here, the apparently consoling knowledge of skin colour, withheld in the cases of Roberta and Twyla, is revealed to only act as a source of knowledge when that colour conforms to the gradated differences of 'black' and 'white.' Yet Maggie's identity is never simply a question of race, but always also entwined with the question of violence. While Twyla and Roberta argue over her racial identity, this identity only becomes important when deployed as part of an argument on violence - the violence they may or may not have done to Maggie as children, a violence which is initially hidden beneath the question of Maggie's race but which resurfaces repeatedly and insistently. Arguing over the episode where Maggie 'falls down' in the orchard, Roberta and Twyla both place the question of Maggie's racial identity on top of the question of violence:

"Maybe I am different now, Twyla. But you're not. You're the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground. You kicked a black lady and you have the nerve to call me a bigot."

The coupons were everywhere and the guts of my purse were bunched under the dashboard. What was she saying? black? Maggie wasn't black.

“She wasn’t black,” I said.
 “Like hell she wasn’t, and you kicked her. We both did. You
 kicked a black lady who couldn’t even scream.” (222)

This initial privileging of Maggie’s racial identity over the violence she experiences has been echoed by critical readings of the text: “Maggie’s role as victim, emphasised by her ‘crippled’ legs and her treatment by the sadistic ‘gar girls,’ becomes ultimately less interesting and more invisible than her role as a text for Twyla and Roberta to read race upon” (Bennett 213; Abel 103). However, I would suggest that it is the violence which Maggie experiences which becomes central to her presence in the text. When Twyla later reconsiders the argument she says:

It didn’t trouble me much what she had said to me in the car. I mean the kicking part. I know I didn’t do that, I couldn’t do that. But I was puzzled by her telling me Maggie was black. When I thought about it I actually couldn’t be certain. She wasn’t pitch-black, I knew, or I would have remembered that. [...]. I tried to reassure myself about the race thing for a long time until it dawned on me that the truth was already there, and Roberta knew it. I didn’t kick her, I didn’t join in with the gar girls and kick that lady, but I sure did want to. (223)

Here, the significance of Maggie’s racial ambiguity does at first preoccupy Twyla; it is the ‘race thing’ that troubles her. However, the truth Twyla eventually reaches, which ends her uncertainty, is not the truth of Maggie’s race but the more pressing, and ultimately more problematic question of the violence which has been done against her. While the nature of racial identity is certainly a source of anxiety for the reader, as suggested above, this does not in fact emerge as “central to the history that Twyla is trying to recover” (Bennett 213). Twyla’s “truth” is not concerned with the emergence of Maggie’s racial identity, but with her own complicity with violence, and the anxiety this provokes is not the anxiety of race felt by the reader, but the uncertainty and potential unrepresentability of violence as an event within the text and in the memories of Twyla and Roberta.

Hannah Arendt suggests that violence is characterised primarily by its instrumental nature; violence as an event is not equivalent to the aims of violence or the outcome of violence, terms which proceed and are projected beyond the event of violence itself. Therefore violence and the effects of violence are not identical, a condition which renders violence itself unrepresentable. Hence Arendt locates violence not only as instrumental, but also as the site of the unpredictable: “violence harbors within itself an additional element of arbitrariness” (4). While the aims of violence may be open to

discussion in rational terms, violence itself escapes rationality (5). Therefore, the attempt to trace the event of violence back to its meaning, the attempt made by Twyla and Roberta as they tell different versions of the events in the orchard, reveals the contestatory relationship between violence and its ends. The instrumental nature of violence makes it inimical to the content Twyla and Roberta attempt to make it bear.

In this sense, violence can be seen as an event that it is always traumatic to the extent that it escapes representation and through this placement within a rational order. While Arendt suggests that the description of violence requires distance from the event (Bar On 12), this distance which marks the displacement of the event through the sign is also a site of loss of the event itself, a problem of representation which marks textual representations of violence.¹⁴ The displacement of the event in "Recitatif" is marked not only by its absence from Twyla and Roberta's memories, but also the absence of Maggie's body and the uncertainty concerning her racial identity is at first a part of, and then subsumed under, her identity as a victim. In his study of "postmodern victims," Mark Ledbetter argues that the presence of "victims" within the text is productive of an ethic of reading through the presentation of the reader with choices between dominant textual voices and silenced narratives brought to the surface of the text through the representation of the victimised body (9), where the wounded body stands as a sign of unrepresentable violence (13). Further, the possibility of such an ethical reading, for Ledbetter, depends in part upon the reader's consciousness of their own identity as a victim: "There are pained victims and anaesthetised victims, but there are only victims" (Ledbetter 23). I would argue that the representation of violence in "Recitatif" works in opposition to such a reading, not through its investment in the "masterplot" (which Ledbetter opposes to the ethically-motivating narrative of the victim) but through the radical silencing of narratives of racial identity and of violence, which problematises the subjectivity of the reader and the possibility of a consoling intimacy with the text upon

¹⁴ A large body of work on the literature of the Holocaust makes this argument: see for example James Young *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*. "It is almost as if violent events - perceived as aberrations of ruptures in the cultural continuum - demand their retelling, their narration, back into traditions and structures they would otherwise defy. For upon entering narrative, violent events necessarily reenter the continuum, are totalized by it, and thus seem to lose their 'violent' quality [...]. For once written, events assume the mantle of coherence that narrative necessarily imposes on them, and the trauma of their unassimilability is relieved. At the same time, however, there seems also to be a parallel and contradictory impulse on the parts of the writers to preserve in narrative the very discontinuity that is so effectively neutralized by its narrative writing" (15-16).

which such a reading relies. The imagining of the body as a readable space upon which the signs of violence can be located suggests that the body is indeed anterior to language (Scarry 13), yet the representation of Maggie's victimhood through a series of narratable identities - as old, "sandy-colored", disabled - does not in this instance add up to the representation of her body or of her injury. The social categories of identity through which Maggie's body is constituted, like Roberta's use of authoritative discourse, do not lead to the freedom of the subject or to the representation of conditions of violence. As Judith Butler suggests in her discussion of the linguistic generation of social identities, "The terms that facilitate recognition are themselves conventional, the effects and instruments of a social ritual that decide, often through exclusion and violence, the linguistic conditions of survivable subjects" (*Speech* 5). The recognition of Maggie only within categories of relative victimhood does not lead to the identification of her pain, and the violence she suffers becomes most meaningful as a literalisation of her problematic status as a "survivable" or surviving subject as anything other than a victim, a condition contributed to by Twyla and Roberta's inability to recall or represent for themselves her ending, an uncertain ending which also marks the (non)closure of this radically open text. The last words of the story, spoken by Roberta, are concerned not with Maggie's race, but with her fate, not with the existential uncertainty of identity, but with the unrepresentable impact of physical violence and the inability to bring this event into presence in any meaningful way: "Oh, shit, Twyla. Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?" ("R" 225).

Victims and visuality in The Bluest Eye

In the novel The Bluest Eye, the constructed nature of racial identity suggested in “Recitatif” continues to have significance. However, within this novel, racial identity is relocated in a social setting where the identity of characters as black or white is no longer ambiguous because the physicality of characters is once again in view. Therefore identity has to some extent returned to the field of the visual, but the novel continues Morrison’s deconstruction of racial identity as visually produced, and continues to question the privileging of racial identity as such over the production of racial identity as a differential yet unequal identity in a racially divided society.

In “Recitatif,” the refusal to allow the visual confirmation of the characters’ racial identities leads to a deconstruction of the role of the visual in producing racial identity as meaningful, coherent and continuous. Visuality is a privileged mode of representation in Western culture (Dyer xiii) and has operated as a metaphor for knowledge since Plato (R Young 14), while the Greek origin of “theory,” “theoria,” literally translates as “looking at” (Wiegman 3). And yet, visuality has a dual relationship with the real, as both the apparent hope of truthful representation, founded on the similarity between a thing and its image, and the inevitable failure of representation, the failure of an image to *be* the thing it represents. The “natural attitude,” or classical realist attitude, which suggests a close relationship between objects of vision and the real, has decayed under modernity, in part through the development of knowledge about actual instruments of vision such as the eye, the microscope and the photographic camera. Once the functions of these apparatuses have been particularised, indeed in the wake of their recognition *as* apparatuses, they can no longer be seen as neutral or ‘natural.’ Under modernity then, there has been a move towards the conception of a ‘rational gaze’ which denotes vision as a mode of categorisation, observation and analysis rather than a means of direct access to the real (Wiegman 26). However, the move away from ‘vision’ as the capacity to know directly, towards the rational gaze which knows through observation, continues to rely upon visual objects as

things which exist independently of the gaze under which they are observed, and a gaze which is itself objective, and therefore capable of 'rational' analysis. While this account of the visual may seem uncomplicated in the case of simple visual objects, visibility also operates within the production of identity. Because of this, visual culture must be read as a specific media in western culture, rather than only an aspect of linguistic culture, and must not be read as neutral in comparison to the specularity of the gaze. While the gaze implies an individualisation which links it directly to a subject, the abstraction of visibility implies an apparent neutrality which must be questioned.

Just as "white" and "black" are differently positioned in their relationship to the concept of race, so they are also differently positioned in relation to the visual, in that visibility has developed as a founding epistemology of race in Western thought (Wiegman 26). As noted above, whiteness has historically been located in absence, and particularly the absence of a racial identity, while blackness has been seen as denoting presence. This relates also to the field of the visual, where the "presence" of blackness denotes blackness as observable, with the implied possibility of measurability, accountability and fixity. By contrast, whiteness remains abstract within the field of the visual. In part this is because of the operative contradiction of visibility, which bases its truth claims in the self-evidence of 'what can be seen' while locating its knowledge in a space beyond the limited bounds of the eye - objects which are no longer seen but become "self-evident." As a result, bodies read as "racial" stand as signs of themselves, while bodies not read through the matrix of racial identity and its confirming visual signs - white bodies - escape their classification as objects under observation. Therefore, whiteness is not contained within the field of the visual, but asserts its dominance through the mode of visibility, making "others" visible and constructing the visible as a guarantee of truth while escaping from it. Patricia McKee develops this point:

The power of whiteness is not visible; it is visualized, and its visualizations both represent and reproduce its cultural power. Whiteness, that is, maintains the properties of media productivity without maintaining properties of physical objects. This removal from the realm of the visible, as bell hooks argues, has been crucial to whites' domination of visibility in Western culture. And the dominations of visibility - of the capacity to produce and reproduce visions and views *as* representations - has been critical to whites' domination of political and cultural media. (American Races 11)

Therefore, visual culture is more than visual representation; it is also the

construction of visual objects and the construction of visibility as a discourse, a discourse which operates according to structures of power. While “Recitatif” deconstructs the power of the objectifying gaze of the reader in terms of the textual construction of identity, *The Bluest Eye* places the question of power within the realm of the social. While “Recitatif” deconstructs the power of looking, through placing the question of race in a position of invisibility, *The Bluest Eye* reveals the consequences of that power for those positioned as black, where the experience of being black results from being placed in a system of visibility which confines blackness within certain, almost overwhelmingly negative, positions. In *The Bluest Eye*, the return to the social realm also brings to our attention the complicity between constructions of class and race. I would argue that while it is crucial to recognise both the social reproduction of racial and class identities, and the ways in which these identities are brought together in a racist, class-divided society, it is also crucial in the context of this novel to emphasise the ways in which these identities continue to be produced by visual media, which have a special purchase on the concept of race.

The means of reproduction of racial identities within the novel represent the proliferation of positive white images at the expense of images of blackness. The cinema is a key source of these images, through films which not only represent black and white characters within a social hierarchy, but which also locate them within a hierarchy of desirability which privileges whiteness. The concept of physical beauty, called in the novel “Probably the most destructive idea in the history of human thought” (95) is explicitly linked with whiteness, “the scale of absolute beauty [which] she absorbed in full from the silver screen” (95) and leads black female characters to experiences of self-hatred. This alliance of whiteness and physical beauty contaminates the social world of the novel, leading black mothers to celebrate light-skinned and white-skinned children at the expense of their own dark daughters. In addition, while white images proliferate in the text, there are no images of blackness through which black characters can be favourably read. In contrast, images of blackness are almost overwhelmingly negative; when blackness is read as blackness, it is repeatedly connected with dirt, poverty and physical deformity.

While this appears to be a straightforward representation of the values of a racist society, the novel highlights the operation of these images of blackness and whiteness in

constructing a social world beyond the visual. In particular, the construction of black and white in terms of beauty is not simply a binary opposition, but the result of specific discourses of femininity in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which are enabled by and arise out of real social inequalities which are linked to, but not only the result of, racial difference. Idealised white femininity is constructed through images of purity, passivity and denial; an ideal which takes the ideal of whiteness itself to its most extreme expression (Dyer 78). This construction of white femininity not only locates black women as the other through the location of blackness in the body, in presence and impurity, in a discursive way, but literally relies upon the presence of black (and poor, among whom black women are overwhelmingly represented) women.¹⁵ Put simply, to achieve the white ideals of both cleanliness and passivity, the white woman needs domestic help, and in the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth century this has most often taken the form of black women's labour. As this demonstrates, and as Hazel Carby has argued, discourses of femininity, the family and work cannot be simply mapped from white social structures to black social structures ("White Woman" 390-1). Instead, recognising the role of racial difference in the social organisation of life reminds us of the power of representation and the social power, or inequality, on which this representation rests.

Any reading of the representation of black and white images which stops at the question of the differences between these images not only neglects the social power at work in these constructions, but also the history of violence which is specific to black and white relations in the United States, and which must be continually recognised in the construction of these images. In *Racechanges*, Susan Gubar contemplates the mixed race child, in a chapter entitled "What will the mixed race child deliver?" In this essay,

¹⁵ In *The Bluest Eye*, racial identity is repeatedly made to stand for class identity, particularly in the presence of racial difference, where difference can be naturalised through colour. When Geraldine, the middle class, light-skinned "brown" woman, attacks Pecola, she sees Pecola in terms of poverty and class, but identifies Pecola, and asserts her difference from her, through colour. "She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel of the shoe. She saw the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up. [...] She had seen this little girl all of her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses on the edge of town, sitting in bus stations holding paper bags and crying to mothers who kept saying 'Shet up!'. Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked in dirt. They had stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned everything and asked nothing. The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between. [...] 'Get out,' she said, her voice quiet. 'You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house' " (71-72).

Gubar examines the over-determined relationships between white mothers and “black” children, and black mothers and “white” children, as relationships which challenge the boundaries of racial identity and which illuminate the hidden lines of power upon which these work. Her essay ends with the possibility that the mixed race child, therefore, may be a sign of hope, of the destabilisation of fixed racial boundaries which are the apparent source of racial division. Though her argument does allow for the different relationships white and black mothers have with mixed race children, and the unequal positioning of black and white in relation to the concept of race through her recognition that “the normative child in Western culture appears white” (204), there is a danger that such an argument can be seen as similar to studies of American ethnicity which suggest that there is still a possibility of identifying a “single” American ethnicity, even if this ethnicity is characterised as “mixed,” an argument which ultimately calls for assimilation and which negates the operation of power within the construction of race - which once again calls for the problems of race to be resolved through the readjustment of racial identity itself, what Gubar calls the possibility of “color without race” (206).¹⁶ In *The Bluest Eye*, the mixed race child holds out no such promise, precisely because of the mainstream denigration of blackness which the celebration of a mixed race identity potentially implies, and because of the history of violence against black men and black women that has contributed to the production of mixed race bodies in the United States since the institution of slavery.

This violence can be seen in the character of Maureen Peal, a “high-yellow dream child” (47) who attracts the approval of the whole school. Yet she is also described as having “long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back” (47), a description which overshadows Maureen’s light-skinned appearance with the threat of violence which hangs over the possibility of sexual relationships between black men and white women.¹⁷ Conversely, Pecola, the dark-skinned daughter of a dark-skinned mother, is rejected because of her appearance, even as a new-born baby. Pauline

¹⁶ A useful alternative formulation of “mixedness” can be found in Pabst “Blackness / Mixedness: Contestations over Crossing Signs,” which posits interracial identity not as a stabilisation of a mixed race identity as an available category of identity, but as a profound and continuing destabilisation of categories of identity: “Racial hybridity should be emplotted *not* as a third space between bifurcations, but as an interrogation of received categorical imperatives and classification schemes” (209).

¹⁷ In interviews, Morrison has admitted that the representation of the Maureen Peal as potentially complicit with this violence may be a failure in her attempt to represent mixed-race identity (Morrison and Naylor, 581).

says “She looked like a ball of black hair [...] But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (96-98). I would argue that this rejection is connected with Pecola’s appearance as black, not as black as such, but as not-white.

Pauline describes the baby as:

different from what I thought. Reckon I talked to it so much before I conjured up a mind’s eye view of it. So when I seed it, it was like looking at a picture of your mama when she was a girl. You know who she is, but she don’t look the same. (97)

What Pauline’s account leaves out is what she *did* expect the baby to look like, and I would suggest that this was an expectation of whiteness, a whiteness which could not in reality or imaginatively be attained as a result of the baby’s relationship to Pauline herself. Pauline’s images of blackness and whiteness, and the meaning of those images, are inherited from the cinema and from her position as a domestic servant in white households, and from the self-hatred she learns in these places. Therefore her unspoken, and potentially unspeakable desire for a white baby reveals the psychic violence of white cultural denigrations of blackness, a violence later to be lived by Pecola herself.¹⁸

This replication of white images, and the abstraction of white identity make “whiteness” apparently open for consumption. Throughout the novel, images of whiteness derive from popular culture and from white celebrity, rather than actual white characters, and the production of this culture as something to be consumed by a black audience results in economic consumption, but also operates on the illusion that this consumption might be realised on a deeper level. Claudia’s reaction to the white, blue-eyed baby dolls she receives is not only a reaction against the valorisation of little white girls she identifies within this, but also against the baby dolls as gifts which stand in the way of what she would truly prize - an experience, centred on her family, rather than an object to be consumed (13-15). Claudia’s rejection of the dolls is also a rejection of the suggestion that she should herself identify with something so unlike herself, something she characterises as alien and inhuman. Elsewhere, however, this desire for the consumption of white images goes unchallenged, in Pauline’s experiences in the cinema and Pecola’s compulsive drinking of white milk from the Shirley Temple mug.

¹⁸ A clearer instance of Pauline’s projection of her own rejected blackness onto her daughter can perhaps be seen in the incident in the kitchen of Pauline’s white employers, when dark blackberry juice splashes the ‘clean white’ floor and Pecola’s legs. Her reaction to the juice, now connected with staining and with Pecola, rather than her offering to her white employers, is one of violence and disgust. See Harding and Martin *A World of Difference* 26.

Consumption in these situations is crucially not merely the consumption of an image, but an attempt to attain a part of what that image stands for, and in the case of black consumption of white images, this is an attempt which will always fail. Pecola is seen buying chocolate bars called Mary Jane's, which are named after and bear the image of an idealised white girl. Yet Pecola is buying more than candy: "She eats the candy and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (38). The apparent fixity of white images, in their endless replication in popular culture, leaves them apparently open for consumption, but because this white perfection is reproduced through its exclusion of blackness, it is not possible to attain what whiteness stands for (and this is more than simply an appearance of whiteness) and to still be black.¹⁹

The impossibility of this consumption of white images is located in the meaning of whiteness which goes beyond its visual representation, and once again race can be seen as an identity constructed within the visual realm which exceeds the bounds of the visual. Repeatedly within the novel, there is a search for an elusive "thing" which will explain the divisions between people. Claudia, dismembering the white baby dolls, is attempting to find "the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me" (14). Stripped to their component parts, the dolls still do not reveal the secret of their desirability. Similarly, Maureen Peal is not in herself threatening, but a threat because of the effect her light-skinned appearance has: "And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful and not us" (58). The Breedloves, as a family, also present a mystery as to the source of their lack, and the solution to this is described in terms of the visual - their ugliness - but does not stem from visual signs:

The Breedloves did not live in the storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. [...]. You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the

¹⁹ It would be possible to argue that while white *images* are apparently available for consumption, it is black *people* who are actually consumed in this culture. This can be seen not only in the self-alienation of the Breedlove family, but also in the self-repression of the middle class "brown girls" such as Geraldine. The representation of the prostitutes, China, Poland and Miss Marie, provides a contrast both to the inhuman dolls Claudia destroys, and to the romantic images of white sexuality imbibed from the cinema by Pauline, as "whores in whores' clothing" (43) and implicitly complete unto themselves.

source. Then you realised it came from conviction, their conviction.
(BE 28)

While the overdetermining gaze ascribes visibility to signs which are not visible, so too the fixity of a racial image, figured as visual, can operate in the absence of actual acts of looking. When Pecola is confronted by a shopkeeper who dismisses her because of her race, this takes place not because of his scrutiny, but in part his lack of scrutiny.

Slowly, like Indian summer moving imperceptibly towards fall, he looks towards her. Somewhere between retina and object, vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. (36)

In this episode, racial identity is revealed not as looking, but as the construction of a visual object which obscures the possibility of seeing. To be objectified under this gaze is not to be seen. Here, the difference race makes cannot be seen because, despite its apparent common-sense visibility, the difference race makes is not in the visual, but in a relationship of power. The shopkeeper's knowledge of Pecola does not depend upon what he sees of 'her' because at the point at which he sees her racial identity (which does not encompass 'her' identity), he already knows all he need know about her. Although colour acts as a signifier in this situation, it does not contain the meaning of race. The relationship between the signifier and sign in this case is not arbitrary because the relationship is produced by the socio-historical situation.²⁰

Therefore, while the secret of whiteness is in its invisibility, blackness is revealed as the already-seen, an object of scrutiny and analysis whose results precede the object itself. In contrast, the abstraction of whiteness, which is significantly represented as "lightness" in Pauline's experience of life with a rich white family (99), does not constitute a stable visual object - it is not possible to look back at "light". This difference becomes significant in reading Pecola's desire for "the bluest eyes". I would argue that this desire must be read not as a desire for whiteness - a white physicality, an

²⁰ *The Bluest Eye* replicates the anxiety over mixed race characters displayed by some passing narratives as the possession of mixed race characters themselves, and once again the "blackness" of a mixed race character is indicated by the possibility of a mark which is not visible, but visualisable. "She explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He [Junior] belonged to the former group: he wore white shirts and blue trousers; his hair was cut as close to the scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool, the part was etched into his head by the barber. In winter his mother put Jergens lotion on his face to keep the skin from becoming ashen. Even though he was light-skinned, it was possible to ash. The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant" (67-68).

identity as a white person, which would once again be to attempt to overcome the problem of race through access to another racial identity. Rather, the specificity of Pecola's desire for "the bluest eyes" indicates her desire for access to the privileged position that whiteness holds in the order of visibility which overdetermines racial identity in this context. This can be seen as another act of racial passing which undermines the traditional racial boundaries which are the foundation of traditional acts of passing. Pecola is dark-skinned, and expresses no desire to change her skin colour: she takes no interest in the careful gradations of skin colour which preoccupy the "middle class brown girls" who exist at the exact juncture of race and identity which Pecola's desire for blue eyes exposes as contradictory, the belief that skin colour makes a difference within itself, rather than within a system of meaning applied to skin colour.

Pecola's desire for blue eyes then is a desire for the experience of racial identity represented by blue eyes. Pecola locates in her own eyes her desire to erase herself from the overwhelming visibility of her blackness:

"Please God," she whispered into the palm of her hand. "Please make me disappear." She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one, then her arms all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. Yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left.

Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear. They were everything. Everything was there, in them. (33-34)

Pecola identifies her eyes as the source of the ugliness she has been taught to see in herself, and so imagines that their replacement with blue eyes would give her access to the beautiful. "If those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (34). Beauty, represented by blue eyes, is therefore also whiteness. However, Pecola's desire for blue eyes would not result in a white appearance, but in the possibility of possessing a white subjectivity, and so a part in the dominant gaze which predestines her, as black, to the position of abject in a culture which privileges whiteness (Towner 121). "Thrown, in this way, into the blinding conviction that only a miracle could save her, she would never know her own beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (BE 35). While Pecola is subject to the gaze of others, she is unable to construct her own self-image.

The position that "blue eyes" hold within the novel and the culture that it

represents then is not simply a matter of physical appearance. Rather, in this context “blue eyes” hold a “social value,” as suggested by Roland Barthes in his theory of the mythic function of language. Language operates as mythic when it ignores the dual nature of the sign as the sum of a signifier and signified, and takes the sign as a thing in itself, as the starting point in a system of meaning rather than the result of a process of signification: “things appears to mean something by themselves” (Barthes, *S/Z* 58). Hence “blue eyes” is not read simply as a combination of a signifier and a signified, which produces a sign, but as the combination of the sign “blue eyes” and the social value this represents within a culture, which produces the signification of “blue eyes”. Barthes suggests that this mythic function of language has a dominating effect. “[M]yth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us” (Barthes, *S/Z* 55). This dominating effect is described as an act of globalisation, which imbues the concept with a richness which appears to fill its possible meanings. Within this globalising effect, myth supplants history, for the purpose of generalising the social value of the signification.

Truth to tell, what is invested in the concept is less a reality than a certain knowledge of reality; in passing from the meaning to the form, the image loses some knowledge, the better to receive the knowledge in the concept. (Barthes, *S/Z* 56)

In the context of the novel, this move from history to myth, with its attendant loss of historical context in favour of the concept supported by the social value of the signification, the history of oppression located within the privileging of “blue eyes” is emptied out, while the social value of “blue eyes” fills the image to apparent completion. Hence, the *racial* aspect of blue eyes is invisible and unspoken behind mythic meaning, yet the mythic value of “blue eyes” is denied to non-whites on specifically racial grounds. In addition, although mythic speech is defined by its intention rather than its literal sense, the ghostly presence of this literal meaning - the apparently common-sense visuality of blue eyes, for example - eternalises intention and produces intention as absence. Hence the social value crucial to the mythic function of language is naturalised. “This constituent ambiguity of mythical speech has two consequences for signification, which henceforth appears like a notification and like a statement of fact” (Barthes, *S/Z* 57).

Therefore, the presentation of “blue eyes” can be read as functioning as mythic

speech because they represent something more than their literal meaning within a system of social value which privileges whiteness, yet which presents this privilege in terms of the “facts” of beauty and lack of beauty rather than through the history of racial oppression. Morrison then undermines the mythic function of “blue eyes” through her insertion of an alternative system of signification which reveals the construction of white privilege and the destruction of images of blackness upon which this depends.²¹ In this system, the sign “blue eyes” no longer functions simply as sign of social value, as it does in mainstream American society, but is dislocated from social value in such a way that the historical and political nature of their relationship is revealed. As a result, myth, which Barthes calls “depoliticised speech” (*S/Z* 58) is repoliticised.²²

The foregoing analysis has examined a visual culture which chromatise the world as black and white and the violence that this specularly inflicts upon those positioned as black. Yet representations of physical violence in the novel are centrally connected with intraracial, not interracial violence, particularly within the Breedlove family. As many critical approaches to the novel have suggested, this can clearly be seen as a result of the internalisation of a racism learned in a white dominated interracial world. However, the ways in which the continuum of violence from the interracial to the intraracial operates in the novel calls for closer attention, particularly the representation of incestuous rape and questions of black masculinity.

One of the primary problematics of a discussion of sexual violence in *The Bluest Eye* involves the distribution of violence and victimhood along trajectories of race and gender. I want to suggest, following Sabine Sielke in her study of rape narratives in American literature, that the depiction of sexual violence in the novel must be read as a representation which takes place within a “rhetoric of rape” (1) and as a representation which signifies more, and otherwise, than ‘real’ rape. “[T]ransposed into discourse,

²¹ In Morrison’s “Afterword” to the 1999 edition of the novel, she recalls reacting in horror to a black friend who expressed a desire for blue eyes, horror inspired by the image of a black girl with blue eyes, and the novel certainly raises the question of the context in which blue eyes are desirable, by suggesting that they may not only be undesirable in some contexts, but may in some cases amount to a “physical deformity” such as those associated with images of blackness in the novel.

²² “Optical politics, if the term has any use, is the process of replacing the innocence of vision with a display of the process and import of ‘visuality’” (Bell 13).

rape turns into a rhetorical device, an insistent figure for other social, political and economic concerns and conflicts" (2). This consideration of the historical location not only of rape as a crime but also of the narratives within which rape is represented requires, I would argue, that we suspend judgment on hierarchies of race, gender and victimisation, a suspension of judgment which requires that we understand the representation of Pecola and Cholly in the complexity of the racial and gender identities through which they gain access to narratives of violence, survival and victimhood.

The scenes of sexual violence in the novel have been read in a number of ways, few of which appear to be adequate to the complexity of the competing claims for subjecthood which appear within the text. In her essay "The Politics of Abuse: The Traumatized Child in Toni Morrison and Marguerite Duras," Laurie Vickroy uses theories of trauma to describe Pecola's condition at the end of the novel as the embodiment of the communal trauma of racism, as a figure who must be reintegrated into the community for healing to begin, even if this takes place outside the confines of the novel. By locating Pecola's wound solely in the racism of the white world which has impacted on and fractured the black community, Vickroy reads Cholly as a conduit of white violence, an instrument who commits violence against his daughter as a traumatic reenactment of the helplessness he has experienced under the gaze of the white hunters who inflict a "psychic wound" (94) on his subjectivity through their violent exposure of his powerlessness against them. By prioritising Cholly's experience as a victim of white racism and translating this experience as something which acts through Cholly but is not of Cholly in the sense that traumatic experience is not "owned" by the victim, Vickroy represents Pecola as a double of Cholly's younger self who is externalised and exorcised by the rape. Hence Pecola's experience becomes symbolic; she is available as a sign of violence, but is perhaps no longer recognisable as the victim of violence herself. Hence Vickroy describes Morrison, and Duras, as "'textual' therapists who attempt to recover traumatic experience from the silence and repression that attends it" (102), yet it is notable that Pecola cannot be included in this therapeutic process. Undifferentiated from Cholly as a victim of white racism, Pecola's position as the receptacle of violence and trauma by the community in the novel is repeated in this reading.

In contrast to this reading, which privileges racial discrimination over the identity

of rape as a form of gendered violence, Marilyn Maxwell reads the novel as an example of postmodern fiction which contains “troubling ambiguities concerning the portrayal of woman and violence” (xxx). Citing sociological research which demonstrates the prevalence of violence against women in contemporary society, Maxwell attacks readings of the novel which equivocate between Cholly and Pecola’s victimhood, and criticises the novel itself for the ways in which the rape is represented. She suggests that there is an:

uncomfortable blending of a sensitivity to female victimization and a forgiveness to black male aggression in *The Bluest Eye* and *Jazz* that informs [Morrison’s] images of violence against women and that stems, perhaps, from her loyalty to both her gender and her race. Such an ambiguity serves to blur the underlying violence of the crime, as the reader, through Morrison’s technical strategies, is lured into aligning herself with the plight of the aggressor rather than the humiliation of the victim. (xxix)

The reader in this account is implicitly white, or at least unable to share Morrison’s “loyalty” to both race and gender. In addition, Pecola is identified only as a *female* victim to *black* male aggression, and this deracination of Pecola continues throughout Maxwell’s reading of the novel: “Morrison will provide us with the history and images of an oppressed black man in an attempt to mitigate our condemnation of his aggression against a young woman” (199). While Cholly’s experience of violence is predicated on his race, rape in Maxwell’s account, and following Susan Brownmiller’s classic account of rape *Against Our Will*, demonstrates “the vulnerability of all women to male aggression” (210). By implication then, rape is a universal crime, understandable in universal terms, while racism is a crime suffered by a minority and as such of less importance. This effect is doubled by the eventual erasure not only of Pecola’s race as female victim, but Cholly’s race as victimiser: “Cholly emerges as an ambiguous presence that undermines the concept of the rapist as pure aggressor” (208). The ambiguity of Cholly’s presence in such an argument is not in fact a result of the terms in which the rape is represented, as Maxwell suggests, but the impossibility that Cholly can be identified as purely any one thing when racial, gender, sexual and class identities cannot be distinguished from Cholly’s identity as a rapist.

Central to this problem then is the possibility of an individual holding the status of aggressor and victim at once, and even readings which suggest that the scene of rape is made “ironic” through the identification of a dominant narrative and its subversion

through oxymoronic devices (Butler Evans 79) invert rather than hold in abeyance this binary structure of victimhood and violence.

Victims and aggressors in The Bluest Eye come into being through discourses of race and gender and narratives of victimhood and survival, all of which are present in the scene of sexual violence between Cholly and Pecola. To define Cholly's act by his gender and in the absence of his race is to distort his relationship with the patriarchal power identified in such theories as the source of and legitimation of male violence. The idea of patriarchy as a structured representation of gendered power must be modified in the presence of racial difference because not all men have equal access to "hegemonic" masculine identities (Hearn and Morgan 1) which structure the oppression of non-white men as well as women (Carby, "White Woman" 391-2). However, it should be noted that the distinction between hegemonic and "subordinate" masculinities structure relationships *between* men, and this alters but does not negate the oppression of women by men positioned as subordinate in normative masculine discourses, a fact that has been noted by African American critics (Carby, "White Women" 393; Awkward, Negotiating 96). Further, if, as Beauvoir has suggested, access to violence and the possibility of violence may act as a mode of self-actualisation which is gendered, and therefore social rather than inevitable, it is arguable that hegemonic and subordinate masculinities are also constructed through different relationships to violence. As Beauvoir argues:

Violence is the authentic proof of each one's loyalty to himself, to his passions, to his own will; radically to deny this will is to deny oneself any objective truth, it is to wall oneself in an abstract objectivity; anger or revolt that does not get into the muscles remains a figment of the imagination. It is a profound frustration not to be able to register one's feelings upon the face of the world. (309)

Beauvoir suggests that such a relationship with violence is necessary to the construction of subjectivity, and that this subjectivity is gendered, yet if we follow Fanon this frustration of subjective development is also racially differentiated. While this does not necessarily change the individual's ability to perform violent acts in the world, it suggests that such violence must be differentiated from the "authentic" and self-constructing violence Beauvoir describes; this is a violence which occurs in the absence of power, where power is the possession of the collective (Arendt 42-52). Cholly's lack of access to the collective power of hegemonic masculinity does not prevent his act of

violence, but this act cannot then be read as a product, or solely a product, of patriarchal power.

Sabine Sielke notes that “American rape narratives are overdetermined by a distinct history of racial conflict and a discourse on race that itself tends to overdetermine issues of class” (2). The narration of rape in American literature is not only a scene of sexual violence but also a scene of racial identity structured through tropes of black sexuality and black masculinity which continue to have resonance today. Just as Maureen Peal’s “lynch rope” hair presumes the crime of sexual aggression through the presence of the punishment for this crime, representations of black male sexual violence are overwritten not only by the “Southern rape complex” (Sielke 1) which imposes fantasies of sexual violence onto black male bodies in white discourse,²³ but also by black women’s literary and social narratives of survival which under-represent the violence suffered by black women (Clark Hine 912) and by the pressures of black solidarity (Wallace 30) which have restricted black women’s ability to publicly discuss intraracial violence. The strength of these political prohibitions can be clearly seen in recent history, not least in black male critical responses to women writers who have taken up these themes (Staples; McDowell 78). As a result of these histories, tropes of interracial violence have an overdetermining effect on the representation of intraracial violence (Morrison, Race-ing Justice introduction ; Awkward, Negotiations 103-15) and there is a discursive lack of a narrative which does not layer interracial contexts onto intraracial crimes.²⁴ It is into this discursive lack that Morrison writes in

²³ As David Marriott suggests, “Acting as both a limit and provocation to dreams of white selfhood, it becomes evident that black men perform a script - become interchangeable with the uncanny, deeply unsettling, projections of culture. The legacy of the demand on black male identity not only works to sustain a repertoire of relationships between black men, imago and cultural fantasy, but continues to have a distorting, and necessarily violent, effect on how black men learn to see themselves and one another” (xiv). The position of the Breedlove family as the ‘most black’ through discourses of poverty can also be seen in the idea of Cholly as the ‘most black’ man who is also the most violent.

²⁴ This can be seen in a number of texts by black male authors in white female identities are imposed upon black female victims of violence; see for example Richard Wright Native Son and Eldridge Cleaver Soul on Ice.

The Bluest Eye.²⁵

The production of the intraracial context requires a continuum between rape and sexuality in the novel. Black sexuality as such is not pathologised, as Pauline's experiences of sex as self-communion and a communion with colour demonstrates (101), but the discourses of sexuality which proliferate in the community are marked by the violence of identification with the white gaze, as described above, and by the female narratives of survival such as the blues songs Claudia listens to her mother sing.

She would sing about hard times, bad times and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without 'a thin di-i-ime to my name.' I looked forward to the delicious time when 'my man' would leave me. (17)

These songs leave Claudia with "a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (18). Claudia's identification with the romanticisation of black women's endurance in her mother's songs is a sign in itself that she has not experienced the reality the songs commemorate, and the feminine identification with victimhood found in them is at odds with her mother's powerful personality. These images of heterosexual relationships produced within the black community (as opposed to Pauline's cinema images) do not reflect the reality of the MacTeer's life, and particularly, as Claudia notes, exclude the life of the black *family* (23).²⁶

That Cholly's first sexual experience becomes a scene of sexual degradation at the hands of a group of white hunters - representatives of hegemonic masculinity who render him impotent - has been central to readings of sexual violence in the novel. As Sielke notes, emphasising the connotations of slavery, this scene of degradation is "'Overseen' and enforced by white spectators, thus embedded in a scene that visualizes the denial of privacy and the racialized construction of black sexuality, this experience breeds not love but illicit family relations" (152). The scene is structured by racial

²⁵ Although this does not form the basis of my reading, this is my understanding of Morrison's often quoted desire that the reader approach Cholly with sympathy: "I tell you at the beginning of *The Bluest Eye* on the very first page what happened, but now I want you to go with me and look at this, so when you get to the scene where the father rapes the daughter, which is as awful a thing, I supposed, as can be imagined, by the time you get there it's almost irrelevant because I want you to *look* at him and see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain" (Tate 125). By doubling of the rape narrative, Morrison makes possible the representation of Cholly at once inside and outside his identity as violent.

²⁶ The images of black femininity found in Mrs MacTeer's blues song can be contrasted with the lyrical but radically different images of black female suffering and survival that Morrison herself creates, images which include violence *and* strength, and the victimisation of black men (108).

difference as a legacy of the social power of slavery, but also by gender difference and differences within gender. Narrated from Cholly's point of view, the scene divides Cholly from both the hunters and from Darlene, his female companion and fellow victim. Cholly is divided from the hunters as representatives of hegemonic masculinity who render him impotent, and whose "long guns" (116) and indifferent but direct gazes disrupt Cholly's subjectivity and his own gaze: "There was no place for Cholly's eyes to go. They slid about furtively, searching for shelter, while his body remained paralysed" (116). Cholly's gaze alternates between that of the hunters, whose instrument he becomes in the attempted rape, and whose desire cannot be divided from his own when he finds that "He hated her. He almost wished he could do it - hard, long, painfully, he hated her so much" (116); and the hidden, "averted" gaze of Darlene, which allows him to look at her, but not to find his own experience reflected there. Therefore this is a scene structured by violent relationships of difference, but within this the categories of race and gender are reflexive rather than collapsed. Trapped between the white but masculine gaze of the hunters, and the 'black' but averted gaze of his (fellow / female) victim, Cholly's experience of an unsheltered subjectivity in this scene marks the beginning of his progression towards the state of being "Dangerously free" (125).²⁷

Further it is important to note that this is not the only formative experience which leads to Cholly's 'dangerously free' condition which in turn apparently precipitates his attack on Pecola. When Cholly conducts his own, self-originating rebirth in the Ocmulgee River (124) it is in the aftermath of his abandonment by his mother and his rejection by his father, as much as his humiliation by the white hunters (126). The condition of freedom in which Cholly finds himself operates as the foundation for Morrison's rewriting of identity and culpability in the scene of sexual violence which follows. This freedom is described as a condition whose nature could only be represented by music (125), an inherently non-representational and non-linguistic form in which the possibility of the multiple chord is opposed to the linearity of language. Yet this representation in music remains potential rather than effective. Lacking access to

²⁷ I would argue that in this scene it is as important to mark the distance between Darlene and Cholly's subject positions as that between Cholly and the white hunters. The fact that Cholly is victimised, and even emasculated in this scene does not reduce him to the position of "the female" as some critics have suggested - see for example Harding and Martin 51. The castrated male is only 'female' under an order of male power, the very order contested by the novel.

social narratives of identity, Cholly's individuation is neither effective nor constructive, and his position, contrary to the postmodern aspiration to read identity as "either / or", might best be described as "neither / nor"; Cholly's free boundary crossing and ability to inhabit multiple positions displaces him from the possibility of social relationships which are either positive or negative. Described through a series of oppositions of subordination and oppression, Cholly's freedom is at once "ironic" (Otten, "Horrific Love" 654) and indicative of the linguistic vulnerability of subjects constructed in language:

One 'exists' not only by virtue of being recognised, but, in a prior sense, by being *recognizable*. The terms that facilitate recognition are themselves conventional, the effects and instruments of a social ritual that decide, often through exclusion and violence, the linguistic conditions of being survivable subjects. (Butler Speech 5)

Cholly's freedom is the result of his passage out of a social language through which his identity could be stabilised in relation to others, and through this reflectivity of identity, would allow the narration of his self-identity. Like Maggie in "Recitatif," Cholly becomes an object of anxiety through his non-conformity with the language of social identity, which includes the categories of "victim" and "violate."

Cholly's encounter with Pecola in the scene of rape is structured by his inability to relate to his children outside of his immediate reactions to them, and this objectification allows him to reify Pecola and her body as a readable text on which he inscribes pre-emptively the cause of his actions.

Why did she have to look so whipped? [...] The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. [...] *If* he looked into her face, he would see her haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness *would* irritate him - the love *would* move him to fury. [...] What was he supposed to do about that? (127 emphasis added)

Cholly's imposition of present, future and conditional meaning onto Pecola's body occurs through the power of his gaze, which only returns to her physical presence when a gesture she makes reminds him of Pauline, and so imposes another, ghostly meaning onto her multiply-signifying presence.

The representation of rape as an act of physical violence is problematic to the extent that it takes place 'out of sight' and that the violence of rape cannot only be located in physical, therefore visual, violence. As a result representations of rape require a textuality which distances representation from the event itself: "If our readings focus on refigurations of rape as well as on rape as refiguration, we acknowledge that texts do



not simply reflect but rather stage and dramatize the historical contradictions by which they are overdetermined” (Sielke 5). As a result the condition of the body of the victim as a sign of desire, consent, refusal and trauma has become central to the representation of rape in literary narrative and legal definitions. In this scene of rape, Cholly’s topographic reading of Pecola’s body as a surface which signals to him does not take into account the issue of consent because, as an object, Pecola’s consent is irrelevant. The difficulty of Morrison’s representation of the scene for many readers is that the narrative appears to confirm Cholly’s neglect for Pecola’s consent by not categorically denying Cholly’s stance: the only sounds Pecola makes are wordless and she becomes unconscious by the end of the attack. In addition, when Cholly becomes aware of her presence in the aftermath of his attack, he becomes “conscious of her wet, soapy hands on his wrists, the fingers clenching, but whether her grip was from a hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free, or from some other emotion, he could not tell” (128). This implication of suspicion regarding Pecola’s response to the rape is repeated later in town gossip; “‘She carry some of the blame.’ [...] ‘How come she didn’t fight him?’” (149). Such a reading of Pecola’s consent not only reflects historical attitudes to rape which imply women’s complicity with rape but also the problem of defining consent in Pecola’s case. If consent requires both consciousness of oppression and awareness of a choice (Allwood 130-1) Pecola appears to have none of the necessary requirements for her to voice her non-consent. This does not imply that she consents to the rape, or that because her non-consent is not active that this attack is not rape, but highlights the structural ambiguity of a model of consent which locates consent only in the event of violence rather than in wider structures of domination and oppression, the ambiguity that is that can be read into the suggestion of “some other emotion” (128).

Therefore the question of Pecola’s consent cannot be restricted to the scene of the rape, and similarly her victimisation cannot be located in the act of sexual violence alone. Just as rape cannot be reduced to the moment of penetration (and the legalistic search for evidence of penetration) (Sielke 88), Pecola’s victimisation cannot be reduced to the moment of her rape. Cholly’s identity, as aggressor, rapist and victim likewise cannot be localised by readings which seek to find in his identity as rapist rather than victim the proof of the crime of rape. This is an attempt to locate in Cholly a guilt which can be extended chronologically back and forward through the narrative, in the manner

in which Maureen Peal's "lynch rope" braids figure both the possibility of crime and its punishment simultaneously. By locating the causes of Pecola's victimisation in the wider structures of the community, Claudia correctly recognises that the crime carried out against her was as much one of "assassination" (163) as of rape.

One effect of this representation of the rape scene is the impossibility of imposing barriers between this scene and the rest of the text, and concomitantly the identification of rape as a special violence within a hierarchy of crimes.²⁸ Consciousness of the intertwining of Pecola's status as victim of poverty, racism and rape can be found in her attempts to rewrite the narrative of her life through the phantasmic acquisition of blue eyes, the possession of which would displace her from the narratives of victimhood in which she finds herself, though this is not a narrative she can inhabit. Through the acquisition of blue eyes, Pecola undergoes a psychic splitting which overwhelmingly attests to the impenetrability of white privilege for black people. Possessed of blue eyes, Pecola cannot see herself; literally, because she sees an illusion, and because the mythic value of blue eyes is not a position to which she, as a black girl, has access. Hence also her absolute anxiety about the stability and veracity of her blue eyes, and her fear that, though blue, they may not be blue enough. To be the owner of blue eyes is a position which is entirely unavailable to Pecola, not because of the appearance of blue eyes in themselves, but because of the relationship between "blue eyes" and images of whiteness which are written on top of images of blackness. If, as Denise Heinz suggests, the "blue eyed gaze" is in fact the dominant gaze of the reader (25) the repoliticisation of the meaning of the blue gaze and the disruption of its signifying power in Pecola's hands repeats the destabilisation of the reader's gaze performed in "Recitatif." However, while "Recitatif" plays out an act of resistance to fixed racial identities through its literary technique which disrupts the visualisation of race, *The Bluest Eye* is located in a social world in which blackness is constantly visualised and devalued. As a result, while "Recitatif" destabilises racial identity from the point of view of the reader, *The Bluest Eye* insists on the limits of this destabilisation in a racist world. Within this

²⁸ Sielke suggests that rape is not only a privileged crime within feminist discourse, but also the "allegorical master narrative"(2) of American literature. Pamela Haag, in "'Putting Your Body on the Line,'" locates the prioritising of rape as a special crime in the advent of a feminist movement dominated by liberal feminism.

world, passing is seen as a destructive rather than a creative act,²⁹ and characters who take part in “voluntary” racial identities are imbued with self-hatred rather than exploiting the fluidity of racial identities. Once again, the erasure of race as such is presented as an impossibility because of the dominance of whiteness in the realm of the racially ‘neutral,’ and the impact of this is not felt only on the side of blackness. Rather, The Bluest Eye suggests that neither denigrated blackness, nor idealised whiteness are hospitable identities in which to live; both Pecola, the “lowliest” black character, and the primer which presents an idealised (white) identity are reduced to incoherence and madness. Further, the representations of violence in the novel, and particularly the scene of sexual violence between Cholly and Pecola, create a narrative in which the textual representation of violence stands for more than the event itself, and whose reading demands the indivisibility of discourses and effects of racism and violence within the world of the text.

²⁹ see for example Elaine K Ginsberg, in the introduction to Passing and the Fictions of Identity, which suggests that passing can be seen as positively creative, figuring the passing character as an artist.

Paradise: looking for “the white girl”

In Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy, Stephen Steinberg recounts the history of the migration of freed slave sharecroppers west to Kansas from 1879, in search of free land and the opportunity to found new black communities. In the 20th century, the communities created through this exodus³⁰ were affected by the Depression, which in most cases led to depopulation and abandonment. Steinberg relates a visit made by him in 1975 to the last remaining population whose foundation could be traced back to this movement, a community he describes as:

a living symbol of “what might have been” if blacks had been masters of their own destiny. [...] “what might have been” - if more blacks had been able to escape the yoke of southern oppression, if they had been free to own land and develop their own communities, if Reconstruction had not wound up a broken promise. (207-9)

In the novel Paradise, Toni Morrison imaginatively reconstructs this history. She does this not through a reinvestment in the ‘broken promises’ of Reconstruction, but through the story of an independent black township whose reaction to the Depression is to move further west, to continue the migration and refound their community. Tracing the history of this town back into its mythic past and forward into its confrontation with an alternative community, the novel examines the role of ideologies of race and gender in the construction of this community through a centrally dramatised episode of violence which displays the trajectories of power and authority at the heart of this black town.

The novel opens with the eruption of conflict between the town, Ruby, and the Convent, the town’s closest neighbour which has become a refuge for a group of women, all from outwith the town. This conflict opens, in the opening of the text, with the question of “the white girl.” “They shoot the white girl first” (3); “the first woman (the white one)” (4) - but the identity of the white girl is not disclosed and remains uncertain throughout the text. This opening sets the reader on a racial investigation,

³⁰ Steinberg notes that such biblical imagery was frequently applied to these migrations, whose leaders were at times referred to as the ‘Moses of the colored people’ (207).

looking for the textual or bodily 'tell' which will disclose which of the Convent women is in fact white. Suggestive details can be found throughout the text. Pallas's father is said to have married "outside his race" (254), but 'race' cannot be read only as the difference between black and white. Connie, the oldest member of the Convent community, is almost certainly South American, and so potentially 'not-black', but is also the only member of the Convent identified alongside the "white girl" (289). While these details encourage the reader to search for evidence of racial identity among the women, this search is ultimately frustrated by the omission of positive proof of identity in the text.

As in "Recitatif," the non-disclosure of a categorical racial identity inverts the subject-object relationship of scrutiny, turning the question of identity into a question of identification. In this case, the question of identification is not turned back on the reader outside the text, but upon the spectators within the novel under whose gaze the "white girl" comes into being. The "white girl" is only seen as distinctly white under the gaze of the townspeople who come to the Convent during and in the wake of the attack (3; 4; 289). Within the Convent itself, when seen through the relations of the Convent women rather than when they are viewed from outside this community, racial identity is unambiguous - not a source of anxiety - not because it is clearly marked, but because race is not used as a significant marker of identity or of difference. By contrast, the scopical regime of the townsmen constructs the "white girl" in much the same way as Cholly is constructed as "the blackest man" in *The Bluest Eye*; the "white girl" emerges as a limit case, produced by the projection of ideologies of race and of gender on which the town is constructed.

In an interview on *Paradise* with A.J. Verdelle, Morrison suggests that the subject of the novel is the degradation of the revolutionary dream which founds the town, the passage from the utopian to dystopian identities of Ruby and the implications of such political instability for any idea of 'Paradise'. Equally fitting seems the theme of 'War,' apparently the working title of the novel (Shockley 719). The novel examines the lines of power, authority and conflict which shape the town and its history, and the promulgation and legitimation of these lines of power through history, myth, narrative, and acts of violence. I want to examine the representational strategies employed in the promulgation and legitimation of power within the town and the oppositional narrative

discourses within and outwith the town that lead to the final confrontation with the Convent women. This confrontation is an act of expulsion and externalisation that exposes the relationships between violence, authority and representation that structure Ruby.

Ruby is structured by racial contexts which are both internal and external. Rejecting the racism of the white world, and rejected by a mixed race town, the identity of the town is isolationist, but this isolation must always be seen in the context of a boundary outside which the racial divisions of a segregated society continue to operate. If, as David Marriot suggests, "Anger has long been a chosen vocation for black men desperate to retain their separatedness, their resistance, to any dream of integration" (viii), the success with which Ruby has established its isolation does not diminish this anger, nor the perceived need for the town to patrol its borders.

While the town exists in a binary relationship of self/other with the outside world (McKee, "Geographies" 206) where "Out There" (P 16) is a place of danger and where "outsider" and "enemy" mean the same thing (P 212), the mythology and ideologies of the town construct a vertical relationship of belonging founded on ideas of race and gender. Within this social structure, the "town fathers" who founded the town and have inherited a line of patriarchal authority from the "old fathers," the founders of Haven, the town from which they have migrated, occupy a position of authority founded on theories of racial homogeneity and gender hierarchy, a hierarchy which seems set to continue in the disputes between "the fathers" and "the sons" (P 83)³¹ in the contemporary life of the town. As such, the town fathers embody a hegemonic black masculinity which is at once a response to the racism of the outside world and the source of authoritarian control within the town, one aspect of which is the rigorous policing of borders located both at the edges and within the community. This policing can be seen as evidence of the extent to which the town, though repeatedly marked by its psychic and geographic isolation (13) is unable to stabilise its borders because the identity of the inside, the town itself, cannot be stabilised.

The authority of the town fathers is located primarily in the history of the town, and the mythology of this history. The official discourse of the town is guarded by the

³¹ This patriarchal structure is also reflected in the religious dispute centred on the preachers Pulliam and Misner, between God the Father and Christ the Son (P 145-6), which must be contrasted with the identification of the Convent women with Mary and with Eve (P 18; 263), as female figures who are written out of the town's theology.

Morgan twins, the social and financial leaders of Ruby whose memories and re-memories of the founding of Ruby and Haven, the town from which they came, are repeatedly referred to in their attempts to construct a stable identity in Ruby. The origins of the town are contained in the story of the removal from Haven, which is itself haunted by the story of the great walk, and the settling of Haven itself. But the historic in these stories cannot be separated from the mythic. In the memories of the Morgan twins, the transference of this story from tale to memory to re-memory is clear: "The twins were born in 1924 and heard for twenty years what the previous forty had been like. They listened to, imagined and remembered..." (P 16). Their memories are memories of a story, not even an experience, and memories of an imagined history. Alongside this family / community history, the town enacts rituals of belonging such as the 'Nativity' play which re-enacts "the Disallowing" of the rejection of the founders of Haven by a coloured town in Biblical terms (P 208-13). The ritualised repetition of such public displays and the reiteration of the founding stories of the town repeatedly mark its identity as oppositional to a world of instability, of danger and of difference: the difference of the town itself is found in the fact that:

From the beginning its people were free and protected. A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. A hiss-crackle from the side of the road would never scare her because whatever it was that made the sound, it wasn't something creeping up on her. Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey. (P 8)

The equivocation of "free and protected" in this otherwise idyllic passage is amplified many times by the fact that the speaker is even at this moment hunting other women as prey, an action which will be legitimised as in the cause of the peace memorialised here. The ambiguity of "free and protected" in this passage indicates the problematic circulation of authority in the town, which is held by individuals who claim to act as agents of external powers - the mythic history of the town and symbols such as "the Oven" - rather than in their own interests. Through this they achieve "the pacification of everyday life" (Keane 36) under which the individual member of the political

community becomes unable to contest, or even to locate, forces of power.³²

Yet the forces of authority in the town are not totalised, and cannot be. The Oven, which was first built in the centre of Haven and then transported to Ruby, no longer serves a domestic purpose but functions as an informal meeting place and as a symbol of the town's identity. This symbolic identity is located in the place the Oven holds in the history of the town, and by the inscription of a religious dictum inside its rim, placed there by the original builders. As a result, the Oven functions as a guarantee of continuity between the first settlement and the second, between the different generations of black community (85-6). However, the Oven itself is of divided significance, and we are reminded that the Oven will always have divided origins, domestic and symbolic, as "a utility become a shrine" (P 104). The Oven displays the temporal division of the founding narratives of the town, which acts both as a repository of the ideological justification and legitimation of the town fathers - both prophetically and retrospectively - as the story of their past is projected into the future to justify actions in the present. This paradox is played out in the Oven, through the presence of the prophetic warning (something which will come to pass) which was inscribed in the past but whose meaning in the present is so open to question that even the materiality of the message is unclear - the decay of the actual letters implies a concomitant decay of an interpretive community, when in fact the previous ideal interpretive community is the result of a backward projection from the present imagined as a site of loss. The town fathers seek to impose a continuity between the unchanging past of the official history and the heterogeneous present which seeks to impose a dream of homogeneity and the stabilisation of identity, and which will come to form the basis of the legitimisation of the violent attack on the Convent.

Not only does the Oven form a problematic symbolic link between past and future, but the debate over the wording of the inscription reflects the debate over the location of authority within the town. The shift from "Beware" to "Be" (P 87) is a

³² This paradox is demonstrated in Foucault's description of the aspiration of architects to design the ideal city, a design which cannot in itself incorporate the ideal of freedom. Freedom cannot be built: "Men have dreamed of liberating machines. But there are no machines of freedom, by definition" ("Spaces" 256). Ruby can be seen as an attempted 'freedom machine' to the extent to which it is a controlled space designed to create a particular kind of society marked as free but in fact circumscribed. Freedom, Foucault suggests, must be a practice rather than an effect, whereas freedom in Ruby is posited as an aftereffect of authority - an effect which must emerge from the design of the town / community.

struggle over the location of authority in an absent God, of whose power they must beware, or the location of authority in the townspeople themselves, figured as the bearers of, and authorising force of, a biblical wrath. The desire of the older generation in this conflict to maintain the narrative of divine, and therefore displaced, power, can be seen as a displacement of their own power onto a narrative of legitimating authority which places legitimisation elsewhere. I will return to this aspect of the debate below.

The gender and race ideologies upon which the 'official' identity of the town is built are exposed in the chapter entitled "Patricia." In this chapter, the town schoolteacher writes an unofficial history of the town, that uncovers the silences upon which the official discourse is constructed. She constructs complex genealogical tables, and this attempt to scientifically and objectively reconstruct the lineage of the town is set alongside long, highly personal and speculative footnotes that address the questions that cannot be contained in the official history of the town or in the names of ancestors and descendants (P 187-202). Through this doubled genealogy, she uncovers what she believes to be the underlying truth of the town, the "8-rock theory" (P 193) of racial purity that is not based on black/white purity but black as a 'pure' limit position within a continuum of color difference. Here, Morrison overturns the one drop theory of white racist discourse to position white ancestry as the inheritance which causes deviation from the racial norm, while simultaneously criticising the absolutism of this position. Patricia, herself the daughter of a light-skinned mother apparently shunned by the community, believes that the identity of the town as 'purely' black is protected by both a biological system of unspoken control over marriage, and by the repression of representations of otherness in the town's history. Here, the political and physical are brought inextricably together through the history of the town's own interaction with racial politics. The original migration is a migration from the violence of white segregation, but during this, the founders of Haven are also rejected by a colored town. This rejection - biblically recalled as the Disallowing P(189) - is motivated in part by economic difference, but is read in terms of race. "Their horror of whites was convulsive but *abstract*. They saved the clarity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too confounding for language" (P 189). The black identity of Ruby is not simply a focus on physicality, but also the literalisation of 'black' as a political identity.

Pat's genealogy remains a secret, one she eventually comes to destroy, and as such joins a series of secrets kept by women in the town (P 91-2; 100). These secrets which disrupt the circulation of authority contrast with the forms of communication that eventually emerge in the Convent's community of women, particularly the "loud dreaming" (P 264) which is a form of secret sharing which does not involve individuation or judgement (McKee, "Geographies" 211).

While Pat identifies the representational violence of the town's official discourse, this violence is actualised in the attack on the Convent, and these two forms of violence must be connected. Hannah Arendt suggests that theorisations of violence must distinguish between power and violence as opposed to one another; power implies authority held through consent, authority which therefore does not require violence to be enforced (Violence 42-52). Violence, therefore, signals not power but a loss or lack of power. While the narratives of origin and of legitimation invoked by the town fathers may be seen as an attempt to gain power in the sense that Arendt suggests, in that power requires legitimation which tends backwards to an origin (Violence 51), the violence of the attack on the Convent, which projects towards a future end which will justify it as means, can be seen not as an effect of the power of the town fathers but as a sign of the instability of their power, an instability that comes from inside rather than outwith their community. In the attack on the Convent, the men project their aggression onto the Convent women, figuring the space they are moving into as itself an invading force.

If they stayed to themselves, that'd be something. But they don't. They meddle. Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into *our* homes, *our* families. We can't have it, you all. Can't have it at all. (P 276)

The terms of this projection are also specifically gendered. During the attack on the Convent, Steward Morgan recalls an idyllic childhood scene of beautiful:

Negro ladies [...] scheduled to live forever in pastel shaded dreams, [who] were now doomed to extinction by this new and obscene breed of female. He could not abide them for sullyng his personal history with their streetwalkers clothes and whore's appetites; mocking and desecrating the vision that carried him and his brother through the war, that imbued their marriages and strengthened their efforts to build a town where the vision could flourish. (P 279)

The actions of the Convent women are figured as active and invasive, disguising the actions of the men themselves and so locating the violence of the attack in the actions of

others. Operating through a spatial division of the territory between the town and Convent which distributes the characteristics of violence and peace between these regions, the townsmen set up Ruby as an area of “metropolitan civility” (Keane 114) whose identity as a region of peace requires the violent protection of its borders. Hence the violence used by the townsmen is identified as external to the town in whose name they carry out their violent attack, through the politically rationalising myth that the town, as centre of authority, “distributes itself from somewhere external to its effects, external to its violence, which is reduced to a transparent instrument” (Feldman 2-3). Allen Feldman’s work on the temporal and spatial displacements central to the relationship between narratives of community and the acts of violence that these narratives legitimate is instructive here. Feldman’s work focuses on communal identities and the formation of legitimating narratives of violence in modern Northern Ireland, but his theorisation of strategies of legitimation and domination applies more widely. Feldman argues that narratives that legitimate power are not secondary to the possession of power, but are performative, and create both the identity of those associated with violence (an identity which then explains violence as a product of their agency) and legitimate identities whose relationship to violence is temporally and spatially distanced. In the terms of Feldman’s argument, the town fathers attempt to reduce the violence of the attack on the Convent to the status of an instrument aimed towards the establishment of a greater peace, and this distances the townsmen as agents from their actions through the rhetorical construction of a theory of legitimation which presents the attack as self-defence: “Legitimation resides in the construction of a fictive depth, a dimensionality of force which draws consciousness away from the concrete material investment in acts and effects that reproduce domination in time and space” (Feldman 3). While the townsmen present themselves as agents of peace and order entering a realm of chaos in an act of self-defence, their action against the Convent women is not aimed purely at external aggressors but is also a reaction against divisions and conflicts internal to Ruby itself. This aspect of their attack is displaced from their rhetoric of legitimation but identified in the subversive narrative of the townswomen who connect the attack to wider structures of domination and authority:

the fangs and tails are somewhere else. Out yonder in a slithery house full of women. Not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company, which is to say not a convent but a coven. (P 276)

The specular identification of the white girl becomes crucial to the narratives of legitimation invoked by the townfathers in their attack on the Convent. As the nexus of racial and gender difference and symbol of the alterity of the Convent women, the white girl is violently expelled from the social order of the town, and from the possibility of assimilation to this social order. As such she becomes the bearer of an identity whose political, gender and racial construction are invoked as the stabilisation both of the identities of the town and the Convent, but also of the meaning of the violence enacted against her. This construction of legitimate and illegitimate identities by the townsmen rationalises the violence they use in the extent to which the white girl, as victim, can be made to embody the end they project upon her; the destruction of difference presented as threatening to the external and internal stability which is necessary for the peace and the freedom of the community. This narrative is disrupted by the non-disclosure of the racial identity of the Convent women within the Convent community, which in contrast to the rationalised identities of the town is a space of multiple and shifting identities which move nomadically across borders within a space where identities are layered and multiply present rather than stratified and repressed.³³ This non-disclosure and multiplication of identity fractures the rationalisation and legitimation of the narratives of violence invoked by the townsmen and reveals that legitimation does not emerge from the identification of the object of violence, but is performative and contingent (Feldman 4); the identity of the white girl follows the act of violence and is produced by it, rather than initiating the attack. As Feldman suggests, “Political agency becomes the factored product of multiple subject positions. There can be no guarantee of a unified subject, as actors shift from one transactional space to another and from discourse to somatic practice” (4). In the aftermath of the attack, the political agency of the townsmen can no longer be supported by discourses of identity which are posited as anterior to this agency. As a result, this act of violence which is directed toward the end of restabilisation results in the deconstruction of the legitimating myths of the town fathers and the possibility of change in a town which has been defined by its resistance both to birth and death (P 306).

³³ See McKee “Geographies” for a more detailed exploration of this aspect of the Convent. I will return to this question and a more detailed examination of the Convent as oppositional space in the narratives of the town in the thesis conclusion.

The discursive production of the racial body as a subject of Western visual culture under the medium of the gaze asserts a theory of continuity of identity between the image and the object, between the interiority of a thing and its outward visual signs. In “Recitatif,” The Bluest Eye and Paradise, Morrison makes use of this theory of continuity to create moments of disruption, in which the continuity of the racialised body no longer functions to provide explanatory links between appearance, identity and action. Through these moments of disruption, her texts draw attention to the ways in which a continuum of physically visible racial differences relates to concepts of racial identity which are no longer located in the body, but which continue to be projected as visible, therefore physical, differences. In this way, Morrison’s texts question the explanatory power of racial identity as a construction under the authorising gaze, yet do not suggest that we can simply deny or go beyond these identities: racial identity continues to appear at the centre of Morrison’s texts, yet the identities of her characters cannot be made meaningful through the category of racial identity alone. Rather, Morrison’s texts demand that the concept of racial identity be put into question, and in the texts examined here the construction of the concept of race through the visual field as a means of stabilising and authorising visual representations is disrupted by the dispossession of these representations from narratives which attempt to locate racial identity through the distribution of racial identity across the binary identities of ‘black’ and ‘white.’ When limit cases of racial identity which appear to confirm this binary distinction appear in these texts, they are destabilised through the introduction of competing narratives of identity located outside the visibility of race, or through the text’s resistance to any representation of racial identity in the visual field.

While the visibility of racial identity appears to offer the possibility of a continuity of identity, the textual characteristic of violence is the disruption of continuity: conceived as instrumental, acts and events of violence cannot be securely attached to their effects and so perform a teleological break in the narrative of identity. Morrison’s texts make use of this textual characteristic of the event of violence to question the continuity of violent events and the identity of those who carry out these actions through complex representations of events of violence that multiply causes and effects. The Bluest Eye and Paradise both demonstrate the role of the racialising gaze in the

construction of racial identities, and the role of violence in not only policing the boundaries between racial identities produced under the binary of the authoritative gaze, but also in securing the existence of the limit positions of racial identity that substantiate this binary structure. By reading “Recitatif” alongside these texts, the non-disclosure of visible racial identity in the short story can be seen as a critical unmasking of the constructive role of violence in the production of these limit cases, through its refusal to stabilise identity and replacement of the structures of identity with the event of violence.

2.

Representing the Nation: Faces of (Black) Violence and the Effacement of Black Victimhood in US History

In the previous chapter, I examined the representation of racialised identities in the visual field to highlight the complexities of Morrison's representations of identities that are visualised through scopic regimes constructed around racial and gender difference. The works examined reveal the power of the gaze to distribute identity within a spectrum of visibility and visibility through the representation of ambiguously racialised characters whose identities cannot be stabilised through the gaze of the reader or of other characters in the text whose perspectival positioning is revealed to be partial, limited, and itself constructed through discourses of power and regimes of surveillance. Morrison's treatment of the visibility of identity in these texts represents an examination of the differential effects of racial and gender identity constructed through narratives of black / white and male / female difference which seeks to disrupt the power of the racialising and gendering gaze, and this takes place in part through the insertion of events and acts of violence into the text. These episodes of violence inflicted upon bodies whose embodiment as racial and gendered subjects is disrupted by their ambiguous and multiple representation mark spaces in the text in which both the identity of the subject and the identity of the violence enacted upon the subject are brought into question. By refusing to satisfy the reader's desire for the meaning of either the subject's identity or the violence encountered by subject, Morrison's works highlight the extent to which discourses of race, gender and violence are re-implicated in bringing forth a subject of knowledge upon whom the meanings of identity and of violence can be securely inscribed.

In the present chapter, I wish to turn the question of the co-implication of

narratives of identity and of violence upon the discourses of national and racial belonging represented in Morrison's novels Sula, Song of Solomon, and Tar Baby. Turning away from the question of the representation of identity and violence in the visual field, I want to read these novels in the context of United States history, in particular the production of narratives of national belonging and national identity in the twentieth century in relation to the evolving civil rights movement and development of radical black politics which took place during this period. By relating the novels to the contexts of their historical setting and production, I wish to examine the ways in which violence as event, identity and political praxis has been used as a motif of racial and national difference and struggle during this period. I will also examine the affect that the inclusion of themes and events of violence has upon the staging of the relationship between the black community and the national scene within these novels. Throughout this section I will relate the novels to the context of national narratives of belonging which are already ideologically produced and form a symbolic field of reference against which the novels are written. The presence of these national narratives within the novels appears as a submerged counternarrative whose historical referents are rendered ambiguous.

The historical range of these novels covers the span of the late nineteenth and twentieth century up until the late 1970s, and they were written and published during the 1970s and early 1980s. Framed by the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the eve of the Reagan-era of the 1980s, the historical span of the novels covers a long and complex process of historical development in black politics and the status of black Americans as United States citizens. Melissa Walker's examination of the relationship between the work of black women writers and this political history, Down from the Mountaintop, provides an excellent frame of reference for this argument. I will also refer throughout this chapter to Gary Gerstle's American Crucible, a study of American national identity in the twentieth century. Gerstle centres his history of American identity on the question of racial difference in the national context, to argue that racial difference has played a crucial role in the public and private discourse of American identity. Further, Gerstle argues that African American identity, as distinct from other ethnic identities, has played a special role as the 'most other' in American discourse. While I will refer to this wider historical frame, I aim to focus my account of the interrelations

between Morrison's work and its historical contexts through an examination of the status of racial identity within representations of national belonging and exclusion which develop in conjunction with the distribution of violence among citizens of the state who are marked by racial difference.

The dominant political parties in the post-Emancipation era showed an extremely limited commitment to advancing the civil and political rights of black Americans, and this demonstrated the extent to which the Emancipation Proclamation did not inaugurate the entry of black Americans into full citizenship. The precedent of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the court case which established the constitutional conformity of segregation in 1896, initiated a system of political and civil difference which continued to deny black Americans full citizenship until the victories of the civil rights movement, such as the the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, and the Civil Rights Bill of 1968. Political debates on issues such as desegregation and affirmative action went to the heart of the debate on the status of black Americans as full citizens of the United States and the recognition of previous structures of inequality, and at stake, among other things, was the construction of American national identity around a democratic and deracialised 'civic nationalism' or around a, variously described, 'racial nationalism' which defined access to national identity through a racial difference which superseded the presence of 'other' races in the national body (Gerstle 59-65).

Debates on the nature of black citizenship and its relation the United States national identity were not confined to the debates of mainstream political parties or to the legislative history described above. Debates between black political figures and groups from the nineteenth century onwards on the best ways to serve and advance the communities they represented or claimed to represent brought up issues of the priority of economic and social versus political advancement, of assimilation versus separatism, of cultural versus political nationalism, and of progression through legislative change and participatory politics versus direct action. These positions are too complex and various to explore in detail at this time; however, many of these positions were united by a concern for the status of the black citizen as citizen of the United States and the implications of black difference, whether as a product of political segregation and discrimination, or as a result of a cultural difference which could not and should not be assimilated to the mainstream, now identified as white rather than non-racial. What I

wish to draw out of this complex history of political action and ideology are the linkages between the status of the black American as citizen and the possibility of or propensity for violence associated with this identity and this question. By examining the position assigned to blackness in national narratives of identity and violence, I wish to suggest that the inclusion and representation of events and acts of violence in Morrison's novels of this period have a specifically political relevance to the construction of identity under discourses of national belonging. By drawing upon this national history of contestation over the status of black Americans and the possibility of national narratives which produce a complex linkage between race, national politics and violence, I will be privileging the national context over questions of the nature and identity of the black community, a social structure which forms an important component of Morrison's work.¹ However, I will return to the representation of the community as a structure which cannot be securely distinguished from the national context in which it emerges.

The engagement of black Americans in political violence in the twentieth century carries the immediate connotation of the civil rights movement and the debate over policies and tactics of violence and non-violence. However, black Americans were also engaged in political violence throughout the twentieth century through service in the United States armed forces in World Wars I and II and the Korean and Vietnam wars. Debates over the segregation of the armed forces and the implications of black Americans taking part in the defence of a nation in which they did not have full and equal civil rights went to the heart of the contradictory position of black Americans as simultaneously located within and outwith the nation through their relationship to legislative doctrines of citizenship. This historical contradiction was explicitly exploited in the strategies of black political campaigns, such as the WWII "Double V" campaign for victory at home and abroad that drew upon the ideological contradictions of the American nationalist position. Despite this, the experiences of black servicemen and their increasingly visible and numerous presence among the armed forces did not lead to significant advances in the civil rights movement or the post-Vietnam retrenchment in mainstream politics (Gerstle 193-195; 218).

The contradictory position of black citizens exposed by the status of black

¹ A large number of critical studies on Morrison include specific considerations of the significance of community in her work. See for example Elizabeth Kella *Beloved Communities*, Cynthia Davis "Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction."

soldiers can also be observed as a function of an ideology of legitimate and illegitimate violence constructed on the borders of the nation state. To fight as soldiers for the nation state, the (raced / gendered / class) identities of individuals must be subsumed beneath the identity of the citizen whose allegiance to the state is produced, in part, by their participation within the state, and the structures of security and freedom which their participation within the state guarantees. These founding premises of the American Republic distinguish between legitimate violence carried out in the name of the state and the illegitimacy of violence which is not sanctioned by the state. While black soldiers participated in and suffered from the violence of war on the borders of the nation in the name of the state, the question of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of violent action within the boundaries of the state was shaped by this distinction, modelled on the contours of the state, between war and crime. The adoption of the rhetoric of war by the black power movements of the later twentieth century was an explicit statement of their rejection of the right of the state to establish the boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate violence, and while these groups remained numerically small, their symbolic impact on perceptions of racial politics and racial violence far outweighed their actual political impact (Gerstle 298).

The rhetoric of the black power movement and the repressive responses of the state emphasise the etiological problem of the location of violence in the context of national politics between the individual, politically identified groups and the state itself. The narratives of the democratic state and of the black power movements produced contradictory theories of the origins of violence, each of which contested in different ways the production of the meaning of violence through its location in the identity of its agents. Drawing on Marxist traditions which necessitated a reading of state structures as systematic and implicated in relationships of power, rather than as simply a reflection of the nation as pre-constituted, black power ideology called not for violence but for “violent retaliation” (Berry 419) locating the origins of violence in the conditions of inequality fostered and supported by the state. The challenge to the power of the state to define the boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate violence contained within the ideology of violence as political praxis emerges in Morrison’s novels as a contestation between ideas of national identity and the location of violence inside and outside this identity.

The relationship between state-sanctioned violence and the identity of the violent actor as source of meaning is also a significant factor in the representation and narration of acts of racially motivated violence suffered by black Americans throughout the twentieth century. Such acts constitute a background of conflict in many of Morrison's novels: while the texts function around individual events of violence, the presence of violence as a condition of black life is suggested through the repetition of stories of black victims and white outrages. The crime of lynching has been used as a paradigm of the intersection between organised and individual violence by many commentators. Described by Angela Davis as "undisguised counter insurgency" (*Women* 185), lynching has long been identified as a 'private' crime (a crime carried out by private individuals) which, through its association with a particular class of victim and nature as a communal spectacle puts into question the division between private and public (state) violence. By putting into question the identity of the agents of these racially motivated attacks - as disordered individuals, as 'others' whose presence creates divisions within the nation state, and as representatives of a racially identifiable 'white' violence which is structural and symptomatic rather than individual and irrational - I will argue that Morrison's texts construct a background of violence which destabilises the border of the nation as a zone which distinguishes the security of the inside from the violence of the outside, and which does not allow the presence of violence inside the democratic nation to reside only in the pathologised individual. Through this representation of violence as a recurrent condition of life within the nation, Morrison's work, when read in a national context, therefore also destabilises the distinctions drawn between the emblematic positions of the civil rights movement, of violence and non-violence. Analysing the writings of a number of radical civil rights activist of the 1960s, Pamela Haag suggests that:

"violence" in the 1960s [...] explicitly described a political universe or order, not one part of an opposition between violence and nonviolence, or violence and freedom. It denoted a *plurality* or system of practices, ranging from obvious physical struggles and battles (the war in Vietnam, the white South's resistance to desegregation, the rise in urban crime, campus protests, the epidemic of political assassinations) to the soul of the capitalist social order itself. (25-6)

This description of violence as the product of a plurality of practices rather than through a distinction between violence and non-violence challenges any attempt to locate violence elsewhere, through strategies of geographic or racial difference, and in the context of

Morrison's work, her representation of the plurality and persistence of the forms and meanings of violence in black life in the United States problematises any aspiration towards a life which is not shaped or marked by violence.

Morrison's representation of the violence experienced by black Americans necessarily takes place within national discourses of violence and violent agents which are racialised. The specular nature of lynching and its identity as a specifically racialised form of violence puts into question Foucault's notion of the modern state as one which no longer makes use of spectacles of punishment or torture as a feature of its disciplinary regimes (James, *Resisting* ch.1). Joy James's critique of the application of Foucault's theory of discipline through surveillance rather than spectacle to the United States is grounded in his production of the body as a site of action rather than identity, which produces the body as universal: as neither gendered nor potentially racially 'other.' In the context of the United States however, and as demonstrated by the spectacle of lynching, the body under surveillance is also a body which can be racially different or nonconforming: "Because some bodies fail to conform physiologically, different bodies are expected and are therefore required to behave differently under state or police gaze" (James, *Resisting* 26). By connecting the visibility of identity with expectations of action and therefore the possibility of racial differentiation in the capacities and tendencies of agents, James argues that "bodies matter differently in racialized systems" (34).

This observation must be set in the context of the development of rights discourse in the United States in the later half of the twentieth century, and the distribution of political rights to individuals who are political actors rather than possessors of (cultural) identities. As Kimberley Crenshaw Williamsa has argued, the rhetoric of colour-blindness has been the dominant approach to issues of racial identity in the post-civil rights twentieth century .

In color-blind ideology, the achievement of equality is measured by formal removal of racial categories across society. The goal of a color-blind world is one in which race is precluded as a source of identification or analysis; its antithesis is color consciousness of any sort. Pursuant to this understanding, the moral force of racial equality is mobilized within contemporary settings to stigmatize not only apartheid-era practices but also efforts to identify and challenge manifestations of institutionalized racial power. It is not necessary, therefore, to redistribute racial capital. ("Color-blind" 103)

Colour-blind ideology therefore seeks to erase the presence of racial difference in the

political world through the erasure of the referents of race such as racialised political discourse and the recognition of racial difference. The political agent then, under a color-blind ideology, should be one who is deracialised, and whose body or cultural identity does not signify politically. Williams and James suggest that this color-blind ideology comes into conflict with historical narratives of violence which bring the body of the racial actor back into play.

Linked with social pathology and sexual violence in the national psyche, blacks are viewed by many whites as contaminants in the political body. The use of blacks as national symbols for savagery diminishes concern for violence in general, especially in its nonracialized forms. [...] US visual culture renders social violence, particularly sexual violence, synonymous with blackness. This legitimized state violence in wars on crime or drugs against racialized- criminalized groups. (James, Resisting 109-10)

While James suggests that links between racial identity and violence are fundamental to the US national imagination, Williams argues that the collision of this racialised imagery of violence with the rhetoric of colour-blindness allows the white viewer to 'discover' the racial identity of violent actors at an apparent temporal distance from the discovery of their violence, and this temporal arrangement acts to disguise any teleological relationship between the knowledge of violence and any consciousness of race. This temporal spacing of racial identity and violence, mirroring the etiological problem of locating the causes of violence in the democratic (non-violent) state, locates the interdependence of racial identity and violence in the spectacle and body of the black actor, rather than in the gaze of the colour-blind viewer, a collision of body and act which serves to 'prove' that the connection between these takes place outside of any racialised discourse. By distinguishing the black actor in the event of violence as racialised, the continuation of associations between black identity and violence points to paradigms of racial identity which are inscribed within the modern agent.

Therefore I wish to examine the representation of violence in Sula, Song of Solomon and Tar Baby in their interrelation to issues of racial identity not through a biological or cultural association between race and violence, but as a product of and reflection on the tensions and contradictions brought forth in American national narratives by the presence of black Americans and the contradictions within and contestations over their access to the status of full citizenship, and the terms upon which this access becomes possible or desirable.

Black veterans and National Suicide in Sula

Critical responses to Toni Morrison's second novel, Sula, have approached the text from a number of perspectives. Many critics have noted the ways in which the text resists the stabilisation of critical positions through the establishment of binary difference (Spillers, "A Hateful Passion"; Bergenholts) and the structural problematics introduced by the distribution of the narrative among a number of potentially central characters: Sula herself as the title character who is also absent for the majority of the novel, Nel her friend and double, and the community of the Bottom in which the novel is set. Maureen Reddy extends this division of labour to suggest that the novel is structured through a "tripled plot" in which Sula / Nel, the community, and Shadrack, the instigator of National Suicide Day which forms one of the frames of the novel, are all "centred" characters. These interpretive divisions have implications for readings of the novel in the context of black American political history, the context in which I intend to set the novel in this reading.

Early reviews of the novel praised it for its ability to represent black life in the United States and later accounts have suggested that the novel attempts to create a black symbolic capable of redressing the exclusion of the textuality of black life from American literature (Baker, "Sula") and to recreate the possibility of "a mythical Afro-American community" (Butler Evans 64). Alternatively, critics have suggested that aspects of the novel, in particular its treatment of gender, specifically resist the representation of a "black text" (McDowell, "Sula"). Robert Grant, highlighting the postmodern nature of the novel, argues specifically that its rejection of the concept of "*the black experience*" (91 original emphasis) means that Sula must be read in opposition to the tradition of black protest novels which have sought to centralise particular representations of black life in the United States. Comparing Sula to the "rhetorical / polemical features generally associated with socio-political Afro American novels" and "protest fiction" (90), Grant suggests that the novel must be read as "*antitraditional*" (92). Grant finds this antitraditional stance in Morrison's containment

of African American cultural history within a novel which rejects the stabilisation or classification of tropes derived from this tradition. By emphasising the absurdist nature of the novel, Grant argues that these features of the narrative should not be taken to “signify ‘intelligible’ socio-political insights into, or lessons on, the ironies of the black American experience” (94) because the indeterminances and ambivalences of the text as structured around absences mitigate against any such “intelligible” (and presumed to be monistic) reading. However, Melissa Walker convincingly argues in Down from the Mountaintop that one of these structural absences in the novel is itself the history of black political protest in the years covered by the novel and the time of its writing (126). The novel is framed by sections which place the community of the Bottom in a historical and spatial landscape which contextualises the history of this community. Further, although the novel certainly focuses its attention on the detail and internal divisions of the Bottom as a black community while representing the surrounding white communities as undifferentiated and abstract, this framing reference to the outside of the Bottom community recurs throughout the text. By focusing on the ways in which this outside is brought within the community in the text, I hope to develop the implications of this relationship by analysing the role of violence in the interaction between the Bottom and the modern nation which surrounds this black community.

The identity of black American men as war veterans forms a continuous backdrop to the lives of the individuals and communities depicted in Morrison’s novels. The town fathers of Ruby in Paradise are shaped by their experiences of war and their return ‘home,’ while the next generation of the town is politicised, and killed, by the Vietnam war. Veterans of two World Wars interact with Milkman and Guitar in Song of Solomon, Son in Tar Baby is a veteran of the Vietnam war, and pivotal conflicts in Jazz take place during or around violence related to the return of black soldiers from the First World War. Further, the stories which Morrison’s characters repeatedly hear and tell are populated by black veterans and black victims of white violence.

The presence of black Americans among the armed forces in the major conflicts of the twentieth century itself produced conflicts in black and white society over the nature of the American nation, and the experiences of black soldiers in the US and

abroad has had profound implications for the development of black political activism as the twentieth century progressed. From the calls by W.E.B. Du Bois for black Americans to put aside racial politics to fight in unity for the United States to the refusal of Muhammad Ali to fight in Vietnam on the basis of racial identity and political solidarity, black participation in the United States armed forces has been a flashpoint for competing claims to American national identity and ideological divisions over black political strategy.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, US armed forces were strictly segregated with black servicemen restricted to a limited number of black battalions and to the least skilled occupations (Berry 313). During World War I, segregation continued on the basis of racial divisions defined by black / white difference while 'Americanisation' programs were aimed at furthering the integration of other, 'white,' immigrant groups (Gerstle 121) and in the context of legislative efforts to restrict black American participation in the armed forces (Berry 313). While black leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois sought to promote African American claims to American identity through the depiction of black American life as representative of the identification between American nationhood and democracy and freedom, an identification crucial to official narratives of US participation in WWI and WWII, black servicemen faced segregation and discrimination within the armed forces, were denied the right to participate in victory parades and, in the South, faced violence from white populations on their return to the United States (Berry 315-8). At the outbreak of WWII, the armed forces maintained black / white segregation, even to the extent that medical supplies such as blood were divided according to race (Gerstle 203). Equally significant was the segregation of labour in the defence industries which denied black Americans access to the employment boom which followed the outbreak of war (Berry 178-9). Like WWI, WWII saw outbreaks of violence around bases at which black troops were stationed, as well as civil unrest in major cities, and black veterans again faced violent responses on their return to the American south (Berry 323, 8). At the same time, however, black participation in the armed forces increased as the demand for men continued, and this demand led to increased participation and authority in the armed forces by black troops.

By the advent of the Vietnam war, in part as a result of the legislative advances of the civil rights movement, the US armed forces were largely desegregated. As the war

escalated, black troops made up a disproportionately large percentage of US forces sent overseas, and these troops were concentrated in the lower ranks. Further, motivated by the lack of opportunity at home, black troops reenlisted in larger numbers than their white counterparts (Berry 330-1). In a military increasingly identified as white-collar and dominated by technology which distanced those in command from the dangers of combat, black forces appeared to be regarded as expendable in the field of war, and the experience of service in Vietnam became a moment of politicisation for many black servicemen (Gerstle 322-4).

Both the ideology of war in the construction of the nation and the ideologies promoted by the particular conflicts faced by the US in the twentieth century had a profound affect upon the construction of national identity and the development of black political movements. Using Roosevelt's image of war as the "American Crucible" in which the nation would be formed from the melting pot, Gary Gerstle describes the social function of war in the American context:

Wars gave the nation opportunities to rally its people against external enemies and internal threats. They were occasions for drawing firm boundaries around the national community and for intensifying popular devotion to its most cherished ideals. They spawned campaigns to turn immigrants into Americans and political radicals into outcasts. They legitimated the idea of a strong state authorized to dispense social justice and to discipline those who were perceived to be its enemies. (311-2)

The "cherished ideals" around which the nation organised itself in the wars of the twentieth century were those of freedom and democracy, projected as the character of the American nation through its resistance to the aggressive and imperialist campaigns of European powers and later Communism. While the nation identified itself through war with democracy and freedom, the debate over entry into the armed forces on the basis of race highlighted the paradox of democracy in a segregated and racialised society. In the early twentieth century, the ideology of democratic participation continued to be based on ideas of capability, as developed within a liberal democratic tradition in which access to democratic rights was defined by ability. In the context of American society, such rights of access were inevitably racialised, and debates over the participation of immigrant Americans in the armed forces often centred upon their fitness for citizenship as much as their fitness for military service. Within these debates, black Americans functioned as an "invisible racial other" (Gerstle 121) whose difference structured the terms in which other, 'white' immigrants could be assimilated

into the American nation. One result then of the segregation of the armed forces was the partial expulsion of black Americans from the identity of US citizenship, and the reinforcement of American identity as 'white' (Gerstle 189). Compounding the work of segregation laws on the one hand, and Garveyite separatism on the other, the experience of war in the early twentieth century therefore demonstrated what Berry and Blassingame call the "paradox of loyalty" (295) for black veterans taking part in a social pact of national identity, allegiance and death which the state failed to fulfil. After calls for national solidarity, the aftermath of WWI saw the failure of the white majority to repay this solidarity with the rewards of citizenship, and as result WWII was characterised by black leaders by the "Double V" campaign - victory abroad, over fascism, and victory at home over racism. Therefore, while the experience of war to some extent stabilised the relationship between white identity and national identity, for many black Americans conflict outside the borders of the nation redoubled their experiences of conflict within the nation as the national narrative of identity was written through the exclusion of black bodies and the construction of the (white) citizen against black difference.² In the double time of the nation, as suggested by Bhabha ("DissemiNation" 294), black and white citizens were positioned differently: while the nationhood of white citizens was posited as the historic font of democracy and freedom through the founding of the nation, and this role was experienced anew in white citizens full and public participation in the defence of their country, black Americans learned their paradoxical position within and yet still out with the American nation.

Gerstle suggests that one of the major contradictions experienced by American society in the twentieth century was the interaction of ideologies of belonging based on civic nationalism and upon racial nationalism (270). While the tradition of civic nationalism is codified in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and Amendments, an alternative history of slavery, segregation and state resistance to the implementation of civil rights documents the struggle over the racial identity of the nation. Violence is inherent in the clashes over access to national identity which result

² Morrison comments on the construction of this national narrative in her introduction to *Birth of a Nation's Hood*. Arguing that the national narrative is an attempt to impose order on the chaos of the nation, she suggests that such national narratives in the United States have long operated on the basis of racial difference. "Like *Birth of a Nation*, the [O.J Simpson] case has generated a newer, more sophisticated national narrative of racial superiority. But it is still the old sham white supremacy forever wedded to and dependent upon faux black inferiority" (xxvii).

from these competing ideologies.³ This contradicts the Enlightenment ideal that civic society and violence are oppositional (Keane 10), and suggests that we should look to alternative histories of violence to describe the experience of black Americans.

Reading Morrison's work in the context of the history of the civil rights movement, Melissa Walker suggests that her work must be read with a historical sensibility which can identify references to the absence of historical references as well as recognise those which are made explicit. This is particularly relevant to her reading of *Sula*, in which the marking of the text by specific dates sets up a contrast with the apparent lack of historical knowledge, or interest, exhibited by the community (119-21). Walker posits that the past acts as a "suppressed model" (Guth 579) through which Morrison relates the content of the novel to the context of the civil rights movement, as well as the post-Vietnam era in which the novel was written. Walker suggests that through the suppressed historical narrative, the novel brings pivotal events of the civil rights era into the context of the novel through their omission from the text and from the lives of the community of the Bottom, an omission which results in the inability of the community to imagine themselves as political actors (125-6).

Such a reading of the novel as invoking history through the omission of historical detail comes together with Patricia McKee's excellent reading of the novel as structured through the ordering of presence and absence which makes absence itself a form of presence ("*Sula*"). Signifying through absence and juxtaposition rather than literary realism, the novel reflects not only upon the World Wars which fall within its time frame, but also the context of writing which is the Vietnam war (Hunt 454).

World War I enters the novel directly through the presence of Shadrack, a traumatised veteran whose experiences of battle in Europe continue to haunt him on his return to the US and his home town. Unable to locate the town in his own memories, and remembered imaginatively rather than intimately by others - "even the most fastidious people in the town sometimes caught themselves dreaming of what he *must have been like*" (§ 7, emphasis added) - Shadrack remains apart from the community

³ Though her comments elsewhere frequently betray the inadequacies of her position on the contradictions of racism and nationalism (see James, *Tenth* 110) Arendt's argument that racism is inherently violent *and* rational is useful here: "Racism, as distinguished from race, is not a fact of life, but an ideology, and the deeds it leads to are not reflex actions, but deliberate acts based on pseudo-scientific theories. Violence in interracial struggle is always murderous, but it is not 'irrational'; it is the logical and rational consequence of racism, by which I do not mean some vague prejudices on either side, but an explicit ideological system." (76)

after his return from war, distanced spatially and socially, as an ‘uncivil’ man in society (§ 116). As a veteran, Shadrack has become stateless (Hunt 451), his experience of international conflict and the trauma of war renders him separate from both the nation and the community he has fought for. The initial trauma of separation from his own materiality, from the material existence of his body as spatially fixed, experienced in the loss of control of his “monstrous” hands (§ 9,12) is stabilised by the sight of his reflection:

There in the toilet water he saw a grave black face. A black so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him. He had been harbouring a skittish apprehension that he was not real - that he didn’t exist at all. But when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more. (§ 13)

Shadowed against the sun, reflected in water, Shadrack’s appearance takes on an existential blackness through which his presence is secured, yet this victory is not complete. Upon his return to the community, no social substitute for his own reflection appears. Other solutions must be sought.

This solution is National Suicide Day, an event through which Shadrack seeks to control and contain his fear, which is not of death but of its unexpectedness (§ 14). This event which sets Shadrack the outsider at the heart of the community also brings the presence of war into the civic text. Shadrack’s introduction of death (and not just suicide but also murder) into the community reproduces in ritualised fashion the violence of war and invites parallels to be drawn between the living death he experiences on the battlefield, represented by the living corpse which runs “with energy and grace” (§ 8) yet is already dead, and the town in which he comes to live. As in *Paradise*, where the townspeople seek to insulate themselves from the outside world and within whose borders death, and life, appear to cease, the presence of death in the community implies a connection to the outside world. Through his “National” celebration, Shadrack brings the potential violence of war within the borders of the national community, an act which reproduces the civilising process of the civic state which seeks to expel violence to its border zones.

Uncivility was the ghost that permanently haunted civil society. In this respect, civilization was normally understood as a project charged with resolving the permanent problem of discharging, defusing and sublimating violence; uncivility was the permanent enemy of civil society. Civilization therefore denoted an ongoing historical process, in which civility, a static term, was both the aim and the outcome of the

transformation of uncivil into civil behaviour. (Keane 19)

By attempting to make static the threat or promise of violence, Shadrack allows the violence of war to become present within the civil community by his destabilisation of national boundaries. In his stateless location, Shadrack no longer respects the official boundaries of the nation state and in his attempt to stabilise violence temporally rather than spatially - through its location in one day rather than on the borders of the nation itself - Shadrack brings his community into intimate proximity with the threat of death normally associated with war rather than peace. National Suicide Day therefore challenges national narratives of peace and civilisation (as the overcoming of death) in the same way that Morrison's veterans haunt the civic narrative of US history cleansed of racial violence through the location of violence elsewhere, in the fields of international war.⁴ Shadrack's "National" holiday disrupts the boundaries of the nation as they relate to him as a black veteran and to the community of the Bottom as a segregated community.

Shadrack's festival of the containment of violence is not only marked as national, but also as "Suicide Day." Suicide here acts as a problematic sign, in that it indicates something which is gestured to but not performed (at least by Shadrack) and the call to suicide that Shadrack performs in the stead of the act itself implies a number of different registers of interpretation. The literalisation of the meaning of Suicide Day at the end of the novel, when the march leads the community to death rather than triumph over death (its intended, though logically contradictory, purpose) further challenges the epistemological status of Shadrack's celebration. Suicide implies both self-harm and individual psychopathology, a negation of life which appears to be the antithesis of the political. Yet if we read suicide in its potential multiplicity, suicide can be seen both as a potential act of resistance, and an act which must necessarily be read outwith the confines of the psychopathology of the individual (Ryan 390).

In his sociological account of suicide, Émile Durkheim distinguishes between egoistic and altruistic suicide. These are distinguished by the relationship between the

⁴ David Marriott notes that one of the cinematic responses to WWII was an attempt to introduce images of black soldiers into war films of the period, "in an effort to represent "the race problem" through themes of trauma. Critics of these films argued that the representation of the effects of racism in relation to a universalised idea of trauma founded in war decentred the specificity of experiences of racism from black characters (75). I would argue that Morrison inverts this movement from the particular to the general by positioning the national within the local, and the experience of war within the experience of race.

community and the individual, in terms of the strength of a sense of ownership of the self (and therefore ownership of one's death) versus a sense of duty to the community which overrides loyalty to the self. Through this analysis, Durkheim allows for the possibility that suicide can be something other than the result of individual psychopathology, through the identification of martyrdom and the experiences of armed forces with suicide. It must be noted that throughout this analysis Durkheim associates egoistic suicide with developed societies and altruistic suicide with primitive social organisations. In this he reflects the traditional liberal democratic belief in the necessity for the individuation of the political actor to secure democracy (197). This liberal investment in the individual political actor does not take into account the operation of gendered or racialised identities in the construction of the civic individual, and as such is open to reinterpretation. As Katy Ryan suggests in her analysis of revolutionary suicide in Morrison's fiction, black political leaders such as Huey Newton made use of Durkheim's sociological account of suicide to rethink the political implications of suicide as a revolutionary act.⁵ I will return to this question below. In the context of *Sula*, however, the suggestion that suicide can be understood in relation to the community rather than the individual, and might take place within a continuum of violence rather than as a specific and pathologised violence has important implications for our understanding of the role of National Suicide Day in the lives of the community and the violence into which it descends at the end of the novel.

Melissa Walker links National Suicide Day directly to the protests of the civil rights movement. "These annual marches, like the nonviolent demonstrations of the civil rights movement, eventually metamorphose into suicidal violence, rioting and destruction" (121). Reading the violence in the tunnel at the end of the novel as "a delayed consequence of official policies that denied the African American World War I veterans and defence workers the full participation in American society they expected," Walker's account equivocates upon the extent to which the violence in the tunnel should be identified as protest or as suicide, an equivocation which destabilises the boundaries drawn around suicide as a specific, personal and apolitical form of self-harm. This extends not only to the rewriting of suicide as "revolutionary" in later twentieth century black political struggles but also to the non-violent protests which played such a crucial

⁵ See for example Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide*. New York: Ballantine, 1973; *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton*.

part in the earlier years of the civil rights movement. These were not themselves characterised by the avoidance, or the absence, of violence, but rather by a “planned sacrifice of the flesh” (Haag 27) which politicised the inevitable violence experienced by civil rights protesters through the exposure to this violence in the form of racially motivated attacks. Just as the actions of the townspeople in marching to their own deaths destabilise the boundaries between suicide and protest, Shadrack’s introduction of the violence he has learned in war into the civil community also raises questions about the status of the violence he has experienced during warfare. As Durkheim notes, suicide is a term which has been relegated to dishonourable deaths in modern society, a designation which has implications for the identification of any act of martyrdom or self-sacrifice in modern times. As Durkheim asks, “When does a motive cease to be sufficiently praiseworthy for the act it determines to be called suicide?” (199). Implicit in Durkheim’s argument is the suggestion that war forms a limit case in the modern distinction between suicide and the “praiseworthy act” which escapes this definition – war implies the conscious choice of the possibility of death, yet this cannot be called suicide in a society which pathologises suicide and yet requires that its citizens fight. For the black veteran whose risk of death for the sake of the nation is not rewarded by full citizenship, the distinction between suicide and heroic death becomes all the more problematic. Hence the discourse of national self-defence legitimates only certain forms of violence and certain forms of self-harm, and the communities for which citizens may legitimately risk their lives are circumscribed by the preeminence of national identity.

As a result of this relationship with national narratives of life and death, Shadrack’s National Suicide Day emerges as multiple and irrational to the extent that it conforms neither to the boundaries of the nation state nor the forms of political protest sanctioned by it. As a result, the deaths of the townspeople in the tunnel signify not only the disconnection of the town from black politics and the civil rights movement, as Walker suggests, but also the possibility that the relationship to violence experienced by the townspeople, like Shadrack’s unspeakable experience of the moment of war (S 7), cannot be expressed in terms of the rationality of protest politics. “In *Sula*, deliverance and apocalypse coextend, are collapsed into one. This collapse recalls the conflicted status of African Americans in the United States: promised the rewards of citizenship, they continually face fire” (Hunt 452), and this coexistence of apocalypse and

deliverance is not only the result of the town's refusal to enter history, as Walker suggests, but also the problematic relationship they have with a national history (and indeed the western history of the nation) which makes unspeakable the violence of the everyday in black society. Describing the experience of slavery, Paul Gilroy suggests that stories of the choice of death over life, a choice defined as illogical, or possibly inhuman in western phenomenology, "reminds us that in the revolutionary eschatology which helps define this primal history of modernity, whether apocalyptic or redemptive, it is the moment of jubilee that has the upper hand over the pursuit of utopia by rational means" (68). The position of black Americans, in the context of national narratives of belonging, is not rational, and the fulfilment of National Suicide Day is also its destruction, the moment at which its supporting logic of prevention collapses under the weight of the contradictions it brings together. The fact that National Suicide Day becomes a celebration of sacrifice without apparent redemption, which leads to destruction rather than salvation, is as much a reflection of the difficulty of defining what constitutes survival for such a community as it is a reflection of the destructive violence of self-sacrifice (Wall 1454-5).

While Shadrack strives to mark the borders of life and death on the outskirts of the community, the Peace household within the Bottom itself is involved in a series of acts of violence and the witnessing of violent death. As Shadrack destabilises boundaries between the outside and the inside of the community in the national sphere, and equivocates upon the meaning of violent death in the ritual of Suicide Day, the Peace household and the women who make up this household are implicated in a destabilisation of the boundaries between life and death which challenges the ideology of survival through which the community identifies itself.

In the most overt episode of resistance to racism in the novel, Sula slices off her own fingertip in order to protect Nel from attack by a group of Irish immigrant boys (§ 53-55). This act of self-mutilation is presented to them as a form of attack: "'If I can do that to myself, what do you suppose I'll do to you?'" (§ 54-5). This unfulfilled threat succeeds where the presence of a weapon alone, Sula's knife, fails, and in fact only appears to incite further violence. The effect of Sula's willingness to undergo injury in

defence of her friend echoes the uncanny effect Martin Luther King identified in non-violent protest,⁶ and again reinforces that violence is not excluded from such protests. Though Sula's ability to bear violence herself is in this instance an act of immediate self-protection rather than an ideological or moral argument, her action disturbs both Nel's attackers and many readers (Grant 97). Sula's choice to prioritise defence over bodily integrity challenges the self-preservation of the individuated subject imagined through the ego-centred continuity of body and identity, and the fact that she carries out this act of self-harm for the sake of another challenges the socialised individuation of the modern subject. Like the possibility of revolutionary suicide, Sula's act of self-harm / self-defence extends the self beyond conventional boundaries of individualistic self-preservation which imagines the self as coterminous with the body.

Sula's act of violence is followed by her grandmother Eva's murder of her son, Plum, an episode recounted through a narrative structure which emphasises the ethical experience of narrative, and through this structure forces the reader to suspend judgment on Eva's actions (Nissen, 268). Plum, like Shadrack, is a war veteran whose post-war condition is one of apparent trauma. He is a drug addict who has returned to his mother's house and to an apparently childlike existence of sweet smiles, sleep and sweet foods (§ 45-6). In a figuration which corresponds with the battlefield image of living death which haunts Shadrack, Eva images Plum's life as a form of living death which does not turn towards the possibility of violent death as Shadrack does, but towards death through a regression to a pre-birth state, described in her fear of Plum's desire "to crawl back in [her] womb" (§ 71), a regression which is impossible for her, and deathly for him (§ 72). Through this figuration of Plum's living condition, Eva suggests that this represents only a choice of forms of death, rather than a choice between life and death, and this figuration is supported by the narration of the moments preceding Plum's actual death by burning:

He opened his eyes and saw what he imaged was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything is going to be all right, it said. Knowing that it was so, he closed his eyes and sank back into the bright

⁶ "Since nonviolent action has entered the scene [...] the white man has gasped at a new phenomena. He has seen Negroes, marching toward him, knowing they are going to jail, wanting to go to jail, willing to accept the confinement, willing to risk the beatings and uncertain justice of the southern courts[...]. When he turns upon you and says: 'punish me. I do not deserve it. But because I do not deserve it, I will accept it so that the world will know that I am right and you are wrong,' you hardly know what to do." ("The Sword that Heals", quoted in Haag, 27.)

hole of sleep. (§ 47)

This description is couched in biblical imagery, including the implicit but unspoken experience of last rites as well as baptism, which again links the beginning and ending of life in Plum's death. This insertion of Plum's death into a theology which questions the identity of death as an ultimate end, along with the possibility of the metaphorical substitution of "sleep" for death in the last line all displaces the moment of Plum's death from the violence of the fire which follows this passage, but which takes place offstage and out of sight in the narrative. By substituting the moment of Plum's death with its metaphorical occurrence, the narration of Eva's act dislocates death from the act of violence which causes it, and lends credence to Eva's claim that Plum's death was inevitable, or perhaps had already occurred. This temporal dislocation of death from the moment of death is repeated in the description of Sula's death, in which Sula's consciousness continues to exist after the moment of death.

A crease of fear touched her breast, for any second there was sure to be a violent explosion in her brain, a gasping for breath. Then she realised, or rather she sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn't have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead.

Sula felt her face smiling. "Well, I'll be damned," she thought, "it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel." (§ 149)

By extending Sula's narrative consciousness beyond death, the moment of death itself is a moment of absence, even an absence of violence, and a moment of transition which cannot be recorded even in the consciousness of the dead themselves.⁷ By marking the moment of death as something which cannot be marked, Morrison destabilises the relationship between life and death from its identity as a boundary experience.

In ironic juxtaposition to her identity as "Peace," Sula is the character most frequently associated with violent death in the text. She is implicated by Eva in the death of her mother Hannah, whose death she watches "with interest" (§ 78), is responsible for the death by accident of Chicken Little (§ 61), and her return to the Bottom is accompanied by a plague of robins taken by the community to herald "evil days" (§ 89). Yet Sula's identification with evil and her responsibility for death are not settled by the text. Sula represents the self "in process" rather than "in essence" (McDowell,

⁷ This treatment of death as absence is most frequently referred to in the novel through the death of Chicken Little, whose moment of death by drowning is also marked only by the impossibility of it being marked (§ 61), and the recurrence of the image of "[t]he closed place in the water" (§ 101).

“Self” 81); living an “experimental life” (§ 118) she is diagnosed as having “no center, no speck around which to grow. [...] no ego” (§ 119). The placement of the decentred self at the centre of the text, as McDowell and Grant suggest, destabilises any effort to read the text in terms of a centred narrative or character through whom the text can be explicated. Here the textual omissions and unanswered questions which fill the novel are set against the textual strategies of the community of the Bottom whose inhabitants seek to stabilise their understanding of the world through narratives which come to centre on Sula and their desire to stabilise her decentred identity, as a “pariah” (§ 122).

A great deal has been said, particularly in feminist readings of the novel, about Sula’s status as a pariah in the community. I wish to examine this briefly to connect Sula’s status as pariah to the suggestions made above about the nature and effect of Shadrack’s “Suicide Day,” and its role in connecting the community to the outside of the nation. The response of the community of the Bottom to Sula’s unconventional lifestyle is to define themselves against her, to “band together against the devil in their midst” (§ 117-8). The desire which motivates the rejection of Sula by the community is not only her refusal to conform to the conventions of the town, particularly her disregard for the conventions of moral femininity, but also as a result of the community’s understanding of evil as a constant presence rather than something which can be averted or fully opposed.

There was no creature so ungodly as to make them destroy it. They could kill easily if provoked to anger, but not by design, which explained why they could not “mob kill” anyone. To do so was not only unnatural, it was undignified. The presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over. (§ 118)

The community is incapable of systematic violence, and this is not only an inability to turn violence to deliberate, or political ends. While the community turns its face from the possibility of the destruction of evil “in its midst,” and is apparently incapable, until the end of the novel, of turning its destructive rage upon those outside the community who oppress its members, the latent capacity for rage in the community, which is turned upon Sula, also has the potential for self-destruction. Commenting on the mothers of the town, the text suggests that:

They had looked at the world and back at their children, back again at the world and back at their children, and Sula knew that one clear young

eye was all that kept the knife away from the throat's curve. (§ 122)

Family relationships within the community cannot be securely distinguished from the conditions of the outside world, and just as Nel's marriage takes on the appearance of death in her submersion in her husband's identity and the imaginative loss of her relationship to her body in his absence (McDowell, "Self" 82), and Sula's relationship with Ajax is marked by her potentially murderous desire to penetrate through his skin and flesh to the "loam" beneath, the relationship of the town to the abstraction of evil which also contains the potential for action reflects the relationship between the town and an oppressive white world.

While the town's identification of Sula as pariah is understood by the town and by Nel as a moral judgment, questions of Sula's guilt or innocence are raised repeatedly and explicitly never settled, and the proposition that Sula herself is 'egoless' evades any diagnostic psychological explanation for her behaviour (Grant 93-5). By reading Sula as a trope or type created by the community rather than a psychologically coherent character, Sula's pariah status can be seen not as a question of morality but of a method of controlling and containing the impact of the violence of the white world and the potential reciprocal violence of the black community. By positioning Sula as a pariah, "the most magnificent hatred they have ever known" (§ 173), the town creates her as a sacrificial substitute for their rage at the oppressive white world. In Violence and the Sacred, René Girard describes the logic of sacrifice through substitution. The sacrificial victim

is a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from its *own* violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself. The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice. (8)

Reading sacrifice in terms of its social function, Girard suggests that the irrationality of violence⁸ allows for the substitution of one victim for another, not in an attempt to mitigate the violence of an external power, in the form of an offering, but in order to displace the violence of the community onto an external subject upon whom that violence can be exercised.

⁸ Girard's approach to this must be distinguished from Arendt's account of violence as oppositional to power. Girard does not distinguish violence from power, but suggests that violence is a function of power. "Only violence can put an end to violence, and this is why violence is self-propagating" (26).

While Girard stresses the effectiveness of sacrifice in diminishing tensions within the community, in *Sula* these tensions mark an ambivalent border between the inside and the outside of the community. Girard suggests that the sacrificial victim is marked primarily by being “sacrificable” (4), a quality dependent upon social positioning rather than any inherent qualities in the individual. One aspect of this is that the victim must come from outside the community, yet Sula is placed in an ambivalent relationship to the community of the Bottom, as at once an insider and an outsider. I would argue that this reflects the novel’s engagement with the historical location of segregation-era black American communities who existed within but were displaced from mainstream of American identity. Unlike the anthropological universalism of Girard’s “community,” the community of the Bottom exists within borders literally and symbolically constructed by their relationship with a white world which controls these borders, as the text exists within the borders of descriptions of the destruction of the place of the Bottom by the encroaching white world, understood economically and politically as well as through racial difference. If the white world exists as the outside to the Bottom then, the awareness of the self-destructive possibilities involved in interactions with the white world makes it impossible for such a outsider to act as a sacrificial substitute. The racial nature of the violence that the town seeks to contain requires that the victim be located on a borderline, related to yet apart from the community, and in accordance with the logic of segregation, the difference of the victim must be defined otherwise than in racial terms.⁹

The ambivalent nature of the sacrificial victim becomes ambivalent through the aspect of substitution, the necessity for the victim to be like but not identical to the real object of violence (Girard 11). That this ambivalence can lead to the mistaken identification of the sacrificial victim can be seen in Nel’s rejection of Sula over her loss of Jude, and her eventual apparent recognition of this at the end of the text. When Sula appears, against common sense attitudes, to see this as a choice between two potentially equal relationships - “If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over

⁹ This is a reading which emphasises divisions between the worlds of black and white communities over the divisions within the black community. While these divisions remain crucial to any reading of Sula’s identity, particularly in relation to the politics of gender, womanhood and the family in the black community, I think it is significant that even in these terms Sula’s difference continues to be read through interracial politics as well. The “unforgivable thing - the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion” (S 112) that Sula does in the eyes of the community is to have sexual relationships with white men.

it?" (S 145) - Sula equates their friendship with Nel's relationship with Jude in a way which Nel cannot accept because she supports the heteronormative narrative of romantic love which privileges male-female relationships over relationships between women. Nel experiences herself anew in her relationship with Jude (S 84), in a way which distinguishes her from Sula, but which also leads to her sense of a loss of self when Jude leaves. Nel's relationship to Sula, no matter how close, does not allow her to experience herself as "real" in the way that her identification with Jude does, and so she privileges her relationship with Jude rather than Sula. By sacrificing her relationship with Sula, Nel is able to maintain her relationship with Jude in his absence, and with her community through her espousal of the values they endorse. That this identification of the correct victim has been mistaken is revealed at the end of the novel, when Nel completes the "howl" (S 108) she sought without satisfaction in the wake of Jude's departure at the side of Sula's grave.

This possibility of misunderstanding is crucial to Girard's account of the sacrificial substitution.

Sacrificial substitution implies a degree of misunderstanding. Its vitality as an institution depends on its ability to conceal the displacement upon which the rite is based. It must never lose sight entirely, however, of the original object, or cease to be aware of the act of transference from that object to the surrogate victim; without that awareness no substitution can take place and the sacrifice loses all efficacy. (5)

While Sula's place inside and outside the community marks the ambivalence of the border between the community and its outside, the identification of this outside as the white segregationist world can be seen in the ways in which the white world as the object of the community's rage - the "real" object of their violence - emerges after Sula's death and the cessation of her role as sacrificial victim. Despite being "the best news folks up in the Bottom had had since the promise of work at the tunnel" (150), Sula's death robs the town of the ability to stabilise their relationships with each other and with the outside world, a relationship codified by the town as survival, but which Sula's death reveals as a relationship sustained through the diversion of violence and rage elsewhere. The 'peace' ironically inaugurated by Sula's disruptive influence falters: "there was something wrong. A falling away, a dislocation was taking place. Hard on the heels of the general relief that Sula's death brought a restless irritability took hold" (S 153).

This season of discontent is followed by the return of National Suicide Day and the apocalyptic descent of the townspeople into the tunnel and disaster. The tunnel, with its promise of work in a world of discriminatory employment practices, recurs throughout the novel as a source of hope and frustration. The spirit in which the townspeople finally join Shadrack's march is initially one of hope which connects their actions directly to the politics of the outside world:

The same hope that kept them picking beans for other farmers; kept them from finally leaving as they talked of doing; kept them knee deep in other people's dirt; kept them excited about other people's wars; kept them solicitous of white people's children; kept them convinced that some magic 'government' was going to lift them up, out and away from that dirt, those beans, those wars. (S 160)

This hope turns to rage in the tunnel itself, rage directed at the absent objects which they have been denied by the economic opportunities they have been refused. They seek to kill the tunnel, "kill it all, all of it" (S 161) and in this outpouring of rage the real object of their violence returns from its displacement through the substitution of Sula as pariah.¹⁰ The tunnel, as a literal connection between black and white worlds, and as a product of white industry which has excluded black workers is itself a substitution, marked by the figuration of their response to the march and the tunnel itself through a series of absences; the unfulfilled hopes which motivate their first steps and the absent objects which lead to their violent attack on the tunnel.

It is significant that this outpouring of rage is initiated by Shadrack and his call. Like the town's treatment of Sula as pariah, National Suicide Day is an attempt to negotiate and control violence, an attempt at self-preservation through the stabilisation of violence in particular events or objects. Yet these strategies work in opposite directions: while the town's sacrifice of Sula attempts to decentre and exclude violence to the outside, Shadrack's call to self-sacrifice brings violence into the centre of the

¹⁰ Patricia McKee makes this link between Sula's presence and white racism: "In *Sula*, people in the Bottom amass an identity of evil called Sula that functions somewhat like the 'background' of racism Morrison identifies in white American literature. But the need for such a ground, and its effects, are different. One might say there is a projection of evil within the black community useful to withstand the projections practised upon the community by whites. Under pressure from external forces of racism, people of the Bottom distribute their moral variations among themselves in order to contain what they could project onto the white population only at the risk of their own lives. What they contain is not only evil that would more accurately be located outside their community but their own rage, which, because limitless, cannot be stopped once let loose" ("*Sula*" 45).

community, an effect that the townspeople experience but do not recognise.¹¹ While Shadrack's march brings violence into the community it also turns this outward through its relationship to war and the nation, and the march itself crosses segregation boundary lines (160). After Sula's death, the town can no longer balance the violence that National Suicide Day refers to, and the absent referent of his march - the violence of the outside world and war occluded by the image of suicide and the literal internalisation of violence in the body - comes into being through Sula's absence.

¹¹ As Cheryl Wall notes, National Suicide Day comes to be more significant as a historical marker than the events of the outside world noted by the dates which divide the sections of the novel (1454).

Acts of violence and acts of love in Song of Solomon

Song of Solomon opens with an act which is a dramatic and public performance of the themes of the novel. In Robert Smith's flight / fall from (No) Mercy Hospital, his act is addressed towards his community in a note which announces his intention to "fly away under [his] own wings," and ends in a declaration that "I loved you all" (Song 3). While his leap from the building is an act of suicide, the physical ending of his life is absent from the first account of his performance, and even when one of the witnesses recalls "the man crashing down on the pavement" she also remembers her wonder that "there was no blood" (Song 198).

That Smith's act is directed towards his community is signified by his public announcement of his intentions, even if this announcement reaches only "the unemployed, the self-employed, and the very young" (Song 4). Comparisons to the crowd drawn by Lindberg before him (Song 3) and the relationship between the witnesses and the spectacle he creates as like that between an audience and a silent film emphasise the performative nature of his act and the communion such a performance creates between actor and observer. Pilate, as "the singing woman," responds to his performance with a performance of her own. The call and response nature of their dual performance implies that this is a black cultural experience, and this is reinforced by the division between the responses of the black audience / witnesses and the uninformed white spectators. The white spectators respond with both apprehension and incomprehension. Their assumption that the presence of a black crowd must represent a political or religious gathering, through their expectations of "placards" and "speakers" (Song 6), raises questions about their belief in the right of African Americans to gather in public spaces, and their desire to "get down to business, giving orders" (Song 6) is an assertion of authority which ironically increases the disorder of the crowd.

Like Shadrack's call to march on National Suicide Day, Smith's public performance connects the individual act of suicide with a communal world of

interconnection. While Shadrack's call to action is absorbed but not initially recognised by the community, Smith's leap is the first act which calls real attention to his presence in the community, despite his public role as an insurance agent.

Jumping from the roof of Mercy was the most interesting thing he had done. None of them had suspected he had it in him. Just goes to show, they murmured to each other, you never really do know about people.
(Song 9)

Yet the hidden knowledge concerning Smith turns out not to be his leap from the hospital, but his participation in the Seven Days, a black all-male secret society committed to responding in kind to white violence against black Americans. Contrasting this commitment to violent action to his leap from the hospital, Katy Ryan suggests that his suicidal action in this instance is not revolutionary but reactionary, as an act which abandons rather than furthers his commitment to the community which characterises Ryan's definition of revolutionary suicide (401). Such a reading is supported by the past tense of Smith's declaration to the community: "I loved you all," and the division of self from society implied in his desire to "fly away on my own wings" (3). As a result, Pilate's song which unconsciously connects Smith's flight with the flight of the ancestral Solomon whose flight from slavery is remembered as an escape to Africa and the abandonment of his family becomes a song of equivocal support and condemnation. Smith's flight / fall, in the first pages of the novel, then brings together questions of love, flight and the meaning of acts of revolutionary and reactionary violence.

Smith's leap from the hospital also marks the birth of Milkman, the protagonist of the novel, and like Shadrack's "National" celebration, the juxtaposition of Smith's action and this birth brings issues of national identity into the local and specific. As Morrison herself remarks in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" (29), Milkman's birth is quintessentially American, despite the presence of cyphers of the African griot or conjure woman and the African flying man. It is heralded by red, white and blue (Song 29) and takes place on boundaries established by state segregation policies. As Michael Awkward has suggested, Morrison's treatment of the relationship between African and American identities in the novel can be seen as a critical reinterpretation of African and Western mythologies of identity through which both the African American heritage of the novel's characters and the structuring mythologies of identity are reconstructed (Negotiating Difference 137-54). While this critical reinterpretation of mythologies of

identity has often been read in terms of black American cultural traditions,¹² I wish to focus upon the more specifically historical and political dimensions of the novel's treatment of national identity as located in the inter- and intraracial struggles for identity, freedom and security described in the novel.

The interpretive imperative of the novel, as suggested by Smith's opening act and as developed in Milkman's journey into the south and the past, is the struggle to define meaningful modes of individual and communal survival for black Americans in twentieth century America. Like the revelation of the physical and economic destruction of the community of the Bottom in *Sula*, black life in *Song of Solomon* is insecure in the face of white racism and divisions between black Americans. The novel covers a similar period of time to *Sula*, ending in 1963, and like the previous novel includes within this time frame the peak years of the civil rights movement (Walker 140-1). The novel also refers to the effects of early twentieth century events such as World War I, and, in the stories of Milkman's grandfather and great-grandfather, cultural histories which stretch back to the Emancipation Act of 1863 and beyond. Some significant events of this period are mentioned explicitly in the text but many are not. Walker suggests that, like the song of Solomon itself (142), the novel is a fictional palimpsest through which historical fragments can be glimpsed and must be reconstructed (132). Walker notes that the first three dates mentioned in the text allude to historical events which are absent from or incidental to the text: 1931, the year of Milkman's birth, is also the year of the Scotsboro case; 1896, the year in which "Not Doctor Street" is named is also the year of *Plessy v Ferguson*, the case which ruled that segregation was not unconstitutional; 1918 is the first year in which black American soldiers were drafted (Walker 135-6).

The novel opens on an ambivalent act of black self-harm whose causes and consequences remains relatively obscure, and throughout the novel the question of the source of violence in the American scene and the appropriate responses to these acts of violence is raised repeatedly. The effect of a background of violence on the novel implies not only the question of violence as cause and effect, or the individual

¹² See for example essays by Sanders Mobley "Call and Response: Voice, Community, and Dialogic Structures in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*"; Fabre "Genealogical Archaeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*"; O'Shaughnessy "'Life life life life': The Community as Chorus in *Song of Solomon*"; Benston "Re-Weaving the 'Ulysees Scene': Enchantment, Post-Oedipal Identity, and the Buried Text of Blackness in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*".

identification of violent actors, but also the effects of acts and representations of acts of violence within national narratives of belonging, justice, racial identity and rationality.

Episodes of white violence shape the lives of many of the novel's characters. The murder of Jake / Macon Dead I, Milkman's grandfather and problematic ancestor, motivates Macon Dead's flight from the south. Jake is shot and killed in the post-Emancipation era by white farmers motivated by a desire to drive him from the land he can now own. This death is repeatedly linked with the loss of Jake's name - the illiteracy which leads him to apparently sign away his land also prevents him from recognising that his name has been wrongly recorded (*Song* 53), and the frequent plays upon Milkman's surname throughout the novel are linked metonymically with this violent death, to the extent that it is even imagined as a deserved, though ironic, consequence: telling the story of how a "cracker" gave his grandfather his name, Milkman says "And he took it. Like a fucking sheep. Somebody should have shot him" (*Song* 89). That the initial destruction of Jake's identity has in fact been followed up in just such a way is an ambivalent sign of both Milkman's disregard for his past and the troubling question of Jake's potential complicity with a national mythology of rugged (white) individualism (Murray 126). Described by Marianne Hirsch as an "American Adam" (76), Jake, in Macon's memories, epitomises the pioneering spirit of the Republic yet is denied the possibility of participating in it through the racism of the post-Emancipation period (*Song* 235). Double-named and ambivalently absent and present through Pilate's discovery at the end of the novel that the bones she has been carrying are his all along, Jake is a problematic ancestor whose significance emerges through the use others make of his story. The potentially assimilationist nature of his self-sufficient life can be seen in the ways in which Macon Dead II, his son, responds to the story of his father's life by embracing a lifestyle of capitalist appropriation and class division which embraces the assimilationist stance under segregation of 'separate but equal.' Macon Dead II repeatedly displays his willingness to participate in and profit from the effects of segregation and his doctrine of power through ownership echoes the ideology of slavery: "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (*Song* 55).

Macon Dead II's desire for control through capitalist appropriation operates through a structure of class division which is also, in the segregated world, a racial

division. Dead II profits from the post-war need for housing and shores up his middle-class position by leasing properties to black working class families. Echoing the class divisions which marked the early civil rights movement (Berry 157), Macon Dead II's upwardly mobile lifestyle not only fails to challenge structures of racism which affect all black Americans, or to extend his success to other members of the black community, but actually depends upon the poverty of his working class black tenants to fill the houses he rents out but would not live in himself. As Roland Murray suggests, "One might say that Jim Crow has created a situation in which the bourgeois patriarch is dependent on black America's dependency on him" (127). Noting that Macon Dead II's financial success is non-developmental to the extent that it is always dependent upon white capital (128), Murray argues that the representation of Milkman's father as the powerful but "Dead" patriarch of the middle-class family demonstrates that the success of a middle-class black elite does not in itself guarantee the "racial uplift" called for by black activists such as W.E.B. Du Bois who located the hopes of black Americans in a leadership which was both male and middle class (Carby, Race Men 9-44).

Macon Dead's accession to a bourgeois lifestyle is also marked by his ability to avoid military service for his son (69), a tactic more normally available to the white middle classes which has had an effect upon the unrepresentatively high numbers of black Americans in the armed forces (Berry 331). Song of Solomon foregrounds the experiences of black veterans in the United States through references to the historical experiences of violence (82; 155) and exclusion (233) suffered by black veterans returning from World War I, and as in Sula, the reactions of these veterans to these experiences come to question and destabilise national narratives of belonging, justice and violence. Whereas Sula foregrounds an alternative, carnivalesque (Grant 94) narrative of the nation in National Suicide Day, Song of Solomon represents historical episodes of white violence and possibilities of black political reaction.

The representation within the text of historical episodes of white racial violence such as the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955 and the Birmingham bombing in 1963, and the imagined possibilities of black political response, allow Morrison to examine alternative narratives of violence within which racial identity, ideas of state and individual violence and notions of rationality and irrationality come to have important implications for the oppositional possibilities of black political action in this period. The divisions of

the civil rights movement between strategies of integration and separatism, and non-violence and violence during this period, in addition to the ambivalence of the white political mainstream in supporting black demands for full equality, and controversies as to what full equality may come to mean, act as a background of ideological contestation to the novel.

The lynching of Emmett Till in 1955, an event also memorialised in Morrison's only play Dreaming Emmett,¹³ appears as iconic within the novel. Referred to only by surname, the delayed revelation that the death announced on the radio is Till's creates an uncanny moment of the intrusion of the real into the novel, and as Walker has noted, Song of Solomon includes many more explicit references to historical figures than any of Morrison's other works (136). The report of Till's death leads to the eruption of arguments among the listening men concerning the causes of his death and the likely responses of the white authorities - both legal and journalistic. These debates are characterised by a division over the rational or irrational nature of his violent murder and the likely response to it.

Milkman, unable to comprehend either the event or the discussion which follows it, dismisses both Till and his killers as "crazy" (Song 88), an accusation he later repeats: "'But people who lynch and slice off people's balls - they're crazy, Guitar, crazy'" (Song 155). By locating these acts of violence indiscriminately in personal pathology, as irrational acts which can neither be explained nor understood, Milkman denies or shows his ignorance of the extent to which lynching, among other forms of white violence, represented a political response to black emancipation and later movements for citizenship and civil rights, a response Angela Davis describes as "undisguised counter insurgency" (185), so linking this violence with the political structure of the nation rather than an impulsive act of an individual or localised group. This reduction of white racist violence to the response of the pathological individual is echoed in Milkman's inability to comprehend the absurdity of seeking legal justice for his grandfather's death (Song 232), and in the debate over the possibility that Till's killers will be prosecuted. One of the barbershop men asserts that this will happen: "'The law is the law'" (Song 82). This depersonalisation of the law, in contrast to

¹³ This play is not in print, but a review by Margaret Croydon, originally published in the New York Times, can be found in Taylor-Guthrie Conversations with Toni Morrison.

Guitar's insistence that the law is always the white law (Song 82; 160), is the structural correlative of the association of white racist violence with the pathologised, but deracialised, individual: the rational (and by implication colourblind) law opposes the irrationality of individual violence and so secures the stability of the state. The intrusion of racial difference and racial politics destabilises this opposition by questioning not only the rational ability of the law to function in a colourblind way and the location of violence in the deracialised individual, but also brings into question the role of the state as mediator between the law and the individual, and potentially exposes the historical complicity of the state in anti-black violence (James, Tenth 104).

While Milkman understands violence only through the idea of the individual, Freddie's response is characterised by a racially-informed knowledge of violence, but a knowledge which does not oppose the racial basis of violence which he locates in the south. Freddie, a "born flunky" (Song 24) blames Till for his 'northern' inability to obey racial rules of the south. "'What'd he do it for?' asked Freddie. 'He knew he was in Mississippi. What did he think that was?' [...] 'Who the hell he think he is?'" (Song 81). Echoing accounts of lynching which have located the instigation of violence in the conduct of the black victim, as Till's historical murder was 'instigated' by a whistle received and repeatedly constructed as an act of violence,¹⁴ Freddie's response implicitly legitimates the violence of lynching as a 'natural' feature of a region which is notably American but elsewhere; "Bilbo country" (Song 81). Freddie constructs a defence of provocation which continues to operate in contemporary public discourses of "white riot" in response to black actions (K. Williams, "Color-blind" 141-2). By dividing the north from the south in this way, Freddie divides the nation in such a way as to locate violence elsewhere, outside the nation as such, a distinction later challenged by Guitar's refusal to politically recognise a distinction between north and south (Song 114).

The barbershop men also debate the representation of Till's murder in the media. This debate connects the individual murder with a broader conception of the reception and interpretation of violence. The media representation of the murder as spectacle is codified by the men by the representation of black violence and the exclusion of white actions (Song 80; 82). This contrasts with accounts of lynchings in

¹⁴ Susan Brownmiller's account of the event continues this tradition by describing Till's whistle as "just short of physical assault" (247). For a detailed critique of this see Angela Davis Women, Race and Class.

the south which are marked by their nature as public spectacles of violence which reveal distinctions between the black body and the white body under the public gaze (James, *Resisting* 26-9) and mark the relationship between black and white actors as victim and spectator (Marriott 5-6). The elision of this relationship in the media again displaces the racial nature of this violence.

The oppositional representations of violence examined here are centred around distinctions between violence as rational and structured by racial identity versus violence as irrational and the possession of an individual whose identity is subsumed beneath the irrationality of the violence committed by or on them. A passage later in the novel, instigated by news of the murder of a white boy and the invocation of “Winnie Ruth” (*Song* 99-100), a murderous and criminally insane woman held to be responsible for this crime, meditates on the black Southside community’s beliefs about black and white rationality and violence.

It was their way of explaining what they believed was white madness - crimes planned and executed in a truly lunatic manner against total strangers. Such murders could only be committed by a fellow lunatic of the race, and Winnie Ruth Judd fit the description. They believed firmly that members of their own race killed one another for good reasons: violations of another’s turf (a man is found with someone else’s wife); refusal to observe the laws of hospitality (a man reaches into his friend’s pot of mustards and snatches out the meat); or verbal insults impugning their virility, honesty, humanity and mental health. (*Song* 100)

The ironic tone of the distinctions made within this ideology of rational and irrational violence is deepened by the gradual revelation of the existence of the Seven Days and their part in the acts of violence attributed to Winnie Ruth. This exposure of an alternative narrative which retrospectively alters a number of significant and ambiguous events of the novel, among them Smith’s suicide, Porter’s drunken suicide attempt and Empire State’s reaction to the news of Emmett Till’s lynching, on his ‘Day,’ provides an apparently logical and rational account of these acts of violence and self-violence through a thesis of white violence and black resistance. The revelation of this alternative narrative of events with its suggestion of the rational rather than irrational nature of violence forms one of several pedagogical strategies within the text.¹⁵ However, the alternative narrative of the Seven Days is not in itself enough to account for the presence or nature of violence.

¹⁵ For an account of other pedagogical strategies, see Krumholz “Dead Teachers: Rituals of Manhood and Rituals of Reading in *Song of Solomon*.”

The ideology of the Seven Days presents a Manichean world of black / white racial difference in which black violence is a necessary and legitimate response to white violence (*Song* 155-60). As suggested above, this theory of legitimization of violence within the boundaries of the nation state destabilises the distribution of violence at the boundaries of the nation state and questions the authorising identity of the state. Echoing the ideology of black nationalist and black power movements of the later twentieth century which related the struggle against racism in the United States to anti-colonial struggles elsewhere (Carmichael 5), Guitar's suggestion that his "whole life is geography" (*Song* 114) is a challenge to the authority of the state to judge his actions.¹⁶ Historically, this political perspective was a response to the perceived limitations of non-violent protest in the context of a struggle with a democratic state (whose processes therefore should be political rather than violent) whose response to organised white terror carried out by its citizens was ambivalent and in whose name violence was performed against the civil-rights movement itself (James, *Tenth* 102-3). Ralph Story suggests that through this opposition to the state, the violence of the Seven Days is revolutionary in character and that they are engaged in a "revolutionary praxis" (156) whose violence is the only logical response to the extremes of white racism. Story focuses on the ideology of love expressed by Guitar and Porter as the revolutionary connection between the community and the secret society of the Days, yet I would argue that this ideology of love is compromised throughout the novel, in both the divisions between the Days and their 'community' and in Guitar's final acts of violence against Pilate and Milkman.

Initially, the ideology of the Seven Days appears to bear a resemblance to the strategies and effects of revolutionary violence described by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon locates the violence of anti-colonial struggles primarily in the violence of colonial regimes themselves which structure the relationships between coloniser and colonised as relationships of violence (29). Fanon's suggestion that the

¹⁶ This association between Guitar / the Seven Days and black nationalist ideology has led to readings of the text which gloss Guitar's position with Malcolm X and Milkman (MLK) with Martin Luther King Jr. - see for example Walker *Down from the Mountaintop* and Story "An Excursion into the Black World." Though the divisions between the politics of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King are certainly relevant to the novel, I would argue that such readings are overly schematic and imply an endorsement of one or other of these political stances which the novel does not appear to support, even to the extent of Walker's suggestion that Guitar and Milkman are 'unfulfilled' versions of these political figures (142-4).

violence the colonised subject takes up is initially the same violence as that practised by the coloniser (31) seems to reflect the Seven Days' attempt to perform a reciprocal rather than oppositional violence, through their 'mathematical formula' of matching black and white deaths in an attempt to construct a racial parity of violence. However, Fanon's more radical suggestion is that revolutionary violence is necessary to the transformation of the colonial subject into a individual existing outside the economy of desire of colonial power structures (48). The Seven Days ideology of violence contains no such tranformatory effect. Restricted in numbers and by secrecy, the Seven Days' longevity is achieved through repetition rather than progress (Song 155) and it is notable that when Milkman challenges Guitar on the possibility of his own victimhood, Guitar turns to this tradition of repetition as a means of evasion (Song 161), and the development which this evasion conceals is the extension of violence to other black Americans.

Lacking the transformatory power Fanon associates with revolutionary violence, the program of the Seven Days conforms more closely to the abyssal structure of vengeance where each act of violence provokes another act indefinitely, in the absence of either the stabilising power of sacrifice, as seen in Sula, or the possibility of averting violence through the a system of public justice which can replace private vengeance (Girard 15-7). The final 'Dead end' of the cycle of violence of the Seven Days occurs in Guitar's assaults on Pilate and Milkman. In attacking Milkman, Guitar negates his own ideology of impersonal and abstract violence directed against an undifferentiated white world (Song 155-7) by attacking Milkman in anger and apparently out of a desire for vengeance (Song 295). Motivated by the desire to gain the means of carrying out the work of the group, Guitar extends his violence beyond the practices of the group and as such comes to embody the unpredictability of violence as a means which can extend uncontrollably beyond the ends to which it is set.¹⁷

While the submerged narrative of the Seven Days presents an alternative text which does not comprise an originary or transcendent solution to the problems of black political resistance to structures of violence, the doubling of narrative strands replicates

¹⁷ This is a quality Milkman recognises in his belief that "Guitar could kill, would kill, and probably had killed. The Seven Days was the consequence of this ability, but not its origin" (Song 210). This description of Guitar's violence as something which exceeds his attempts to limit it to the practice of a political ideology reveals the problem of the origin of violence commented on above.

the interpretive techniques developed elsewhere in the novel, and primarily in Milkman's journey, which becomes a quest to discover his ancestral past. This journey involves travelling south into his family's past and into a history which must be reconstructed and reinterpreted before it can be connected to the present. Critical responses have debated the extent to which Milkman's quest can be seen as a critical rewriting of the androcentric structure of the quest narrative,¹⁸ particularly in light of the novel's ambiguous final lines.

The Seven Days are formed in response to the assault and castration of black WWI veterans (Song 155) and are organised as an exclusively male order which is self-founded and self-regenerating and whose priestly code of conduct (Murray 130) excludes the possibility of children. Speaking from within this exclusively male world, Guitar describes the relationship between black men and black women from the point of view of the necessity of the redemption of black male authority and black male ambition. Accusing black women of desiring to consume the life of black men (Song 222), Guitar reestablishes the political relationship between black men and women as one of possession: he will defend the black woman "Because she's *mine*" (Song 223). Critics have noted the extent to which black gender relations in the novel construct a response to the infamous Moynihan report on poverty and the black family which posited that black poverty and the breakdown of black families was a result of the displacement of black patriarchal authority by female heads of household. This response satirises Macon Dead II as the black patriarch called for by Moynihan whose house is a place of death rather than life, and represents Pilate's female-headed household as an alternative space of nourishment and life (Hirsch 71). Yet the tradition of configuring oppositional black politics around the figure of a black patriarchal order has a longer history than this, stretching back to the works of black public figures such as Martin Delaney (Gilroy 25). As Paula Giddings argues, the post-WWII black rights movements espoused an irrevocably gendered ideology of black liberation which was a result both of social conditions which created large-scale unemployment among black

¹⁸ On the novel as a critical rewriting of western quest narratives and mythology see Hirsch "Knowing Their Names: Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon."; for a reading of the novel's response to androcentric features of African myth, see Awkward Negotiating Difference; for a reading of the novel as a response to the black male literary tradition emerging from the work of Ralph Ellison, see Benston "Re-Weaving the 'Ulysees Scene'". For an alternative view which rejects the idea that Milkman's quest is successful in these terms see Gerry Brenner, "Song of Solomon: Rejecting Rank's Monomyth and Feminism."

men and the sociological representation of black life of which the Moynihan report was one factor (314-21).

While the non-regenerative violence of the Seven Days represents the logical limit of the patriarchal order - a society from which women are completely excluded - other forms of male initiation in the novel are presented in more ambivalent terms. When Milkman takes part in the hunt with the southern men which results in a heightened affinity with the world around him, of which he has previously been unaware (and it is useful to compare his transcendent experience of communion with the earth in this episode with the destruction of his clothes and other material possessions during his journey through the woods in Danville earlier in the novel (Song 250-4)), this episode is framed by scenes of gendered violence: the knife fight accompanied by male homosexual insults (Song 267-8) and the slaughter of the cat with its overtones of lynching imagery (Song 281-3).

Throughout the novel, violence between and performed by men repeatedly takes place in the public arena or in communal public spaces. Both Smith and Porter choose to perform their suicides or suicide attempts before a crowd which plays an integral role in the event. The hunt takes place within an all male community whose dispersal within the wood is overcome by their reunification at the end and their communal celebration of the fruits of the hunt. The Seven Days, as noted above, come into being to avenge acts of violence carried out against men and respond to these violent attacks as attacks upon the manhood of the victims (Song 81). Even when the victims of the attack they seek to avenge are female, as in the Birmingham bombing, the insertion of the Days as an all male collective into the place of the victim as source of redress restructures this violence event as a confrontation which once again takes place among men. By contrast, acts of violence which involve women most frequently take place within domestic spaces: Reba and Ruth both suffer forms of domestic violence which take place in or around the home (Song 93; 67), while the confrontations resulting from Hagar's violent pursuit of Milkman occur in enclosed spaces, in houses and bedrooms, and her death is a private rather than public event. However, the novel contests this gendered division of the private and the public through the figure of Pilate, a woman who has travelled through the geographical space of the nation, and whose ability to control and use violence, in contrast to other female figures, questions the designation of violence as a male attribute.

Through Pilate, the novel insists that the “male” violence characterised by the Seven Days be seen as an aspect of patriarchal ideology which is gendered but not essentially male. By exploring “the viability of a dual masculine-feminine legacy” (Hirsch 73) through the alternative influences of Macon, Guitar, Pilate and others, the fruit that Milkman’s quest bears is gifts which signify their multiple identities within discourses of love *and* violence: the heart of the cat killed in the hunt, and Hagar’s hair. The pluralistic significance of these gifts challenge the notion that the qualities of love and violence can be distributed across a gendered axis of identity as these gifts are realised within Milkman’s quest.

The dialogical identity of violence and love signified by Milkman’s quest is enacted in the ambiguous final lines of the novel. Milkman “leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled towards Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother” (*Song* 337). The designation of Guitar as Milkman’s brother echoes Pilate’s equivocation upon whether Milkman is Hagar’s brother or her cousin: ““what’s the difference in the way you act towards them? Don’t you have to act the same way to both?”” (*Song* 44). By describing interrelations by an ethic of action rather than a ‘genetic’ of being, Pilate suggests a plurality of communal relationships which negates the class divisions practised by Macon Dead II and the insider / outsider divisions necessary to the constitution of the secret society of the Seven Days. Therefore Milkman’s potentially suicidal leap (Lubiano 32) is not directed towards division from the community, as Smith’s appears to be and as Guitar’s ‘already dead’ existence in the Seven Days becomes, but potentially a leap which is both violent and ethical.

Tar Baby: violence and racial identity beyond national borders

Sula and Song of Solomon both refer, through their historical settings and narrative diversions into the past, to a long period of history which includes the rise and beginnings of the demise of the civil rights movement. Tar Baby by contrast covers a relatively brief time-span and its setting is the closest of Morrison's novels to its actual time of writing, the late 1970's and early 80's. This period was a time of political alienation in the US which was marked by a decline in the legislative and economic gains of the civil rights movement, such as affirmative action. These gains had chiefly benefited the black elite, but had created the impression of more widespread black prosperity than was actually the case, and there remained an economic divide within different classes of black and white citizens, with black Americans comprising the group whose gains in terms of social mobility remained most vulnerable to economic change (Marable 149-84). The perception that the aims of the civil rights movement had been achieved, fostered by the visibility of a new, but still numerically small, black middle class led to a backlash against the protection of the gains of the civil rights movement which would eventually culminate in the adoption of civil rights discourse for 'white rights' in the Reagan era (James, Tenth 106). This usurpation of civil rights discourse was made possible by the increasing predominance of rights-based politics founded on a universal subject allied with the growth of ideas of multiculturalism which allowed for the expression of cultural difference by disengaging cultural difference from issues of social, economic and political difference. This emphasis upon individualism and the rise of consumer identities based upon economic success and material-cultural orientations reduces previous signifiers of political identity such as race, gender, sexuality and class to signs of symbolic rather than political power (Emberley 407). These historical developments inform the tensions and contestations played out by the characters of Tar Baby. Further, while the previous novels raise questions concerning the stability of national narratives and national borders through representations of lines of division and difference within the United States, Tar Baby's locations and dislocations extend

beyond the borders of the United States to sites in the Caribbean and continental Europe. This geographical extension of place in the novel is at once schematic and historical: the symbolic and metaphorical weight of these places is interwoven with a historical consciousness which negates the recuperation of any of these places as a safe haven or stable environment for identity formation through the plurality of their symbolic and historical significances. Therefore, while the historical context of identity politics problematises the possibility of an oppositional politics or the political location of the individual in terms of racial identity, the distribution of events of the novel across a range of multiply signifying geographical locations invokes discourses of colonialism and postcolonialism in its suggestion that all spaces in this novel are potentially already structured by relationships of domination and submission. I wish to argue that this distribution of identity and geography within a range of historical and spatial contexts severely problematises the possibilities of effective action and meaningful movement for the characters of the novel, and that the impossibility of such movement and action is juxtaposed with eruptions of violence within the text which are now no longer linked even to the possibility of oppositional politics.

Central to the novel is the relationship between Jadine Childs, a light-skinned, European-educated black woman, and Son, a dark skinned, lower class black man. The schematic distribution of identity signifiers between these characters sets up their relationship as one of contestation which is not easily resolved. Each imagines themselves as engaged in a mission to rescue the other:

Each was pulling the other from the maw of hell - its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing? (TB 272)

Identified through the narrative voice as iconic and representative figures, Jadine and Son represent competing values and registers of individual and social identity which are never original positions and always already marked by historical discourses of racial and gender identity. Even in the mode of apparent objectivity which is the narrative voice, these descriptions of Jadine and Son - as the black male victim described in the Moynihan report, or as the black nursemaid who 'bears' white children by investing in the welfare of white families rather than their own children - bear the traces of history.

Jadine, who has been educated in Europe at the apparent expense of her white

patron, repeatedly expresses a desire for a race free identity and denies any desire for race consciousness as identified with the civil rights movement or black power movements. She reacts with anger and fear when others identify her on the basis of her race, when she is provoked into "blackening up or universalising out" (TB 62) or made to feel "lonely and inauthentic" (TB 45). Describing her desire she says "sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside - not American - not black - just me?" (TB 45). Jadine's desire for a distinction between the inside and outside, between appearance and essence, which locates her identity elsewhere than her racial or national status reflects her fear of racial identity as something imposed by the gaze of others. Yet Jadine, who fears being looked at (TB 43) makes a living as a model whose career is founded on a specific racial identity (TB 115). This reduction of her racial identity to a surface effect which can be exploited is reflected in Jadine's identification of racial consciousness and racial identity through cultural effects such as taste: for example the significance she fears will be applied to her appreciation or lack of appreciation of jazz (TB 45), the Black Arts movement or gospel music (TB 72). Constructed through the accumulation of surface effects, racial identity for Jadine takes on the qualities of appearance and performance rather than being, a doubling of identity which brings into question Fanon's depiction of the colonial subject as self-divided; presented only with a choice of roles to play without the option of an authentic original identity (Emberley 416).

While Jadine at once seeks to deny and profit from the visibility of race as skin colour, and locates racial identity in cultural taste, she continues to identify racial 'others' through discourses of race founded on stereotypes and a specular fetishisation of racial difference. Margaret Street, Sydney and Jadine share the same reaction to Son's illicit presence in their house: to identify him with the stereotype of the black male intruder as rapist (TB 85; 126); he has "rape, theft or murder on his mind" (TB 91), is a "wife-raper" (TB 99) despite the fact that he has been in the house undetected without committing any crime. When Ondine tries to defend him on the grounds that he hasn't yet acted in a criminal manner, Sydney challenges her: "You know what's on his mind, do you?" (TB 99). The absence of any evidence of Son's intent is dismissed by the invocation of the evidence of inner character and criminality exposed by his surface identity as 'black' which informs the possibilities of his criminal agency. In the first

confrontation between Son and Jadine, Jadine confirms this association between black masculinity and criminal violence through her fetishistic reaction to Son's hair: "like bundles of long whips or lashes which could grab her and beat her to jelly. And would. Wild, aggressive vicious hair that needed to be put in jail. Uncivilised, reform school hair. Mau Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair" (TB 113). This slippage between violence and stereotypes of African identity as a 'black' identity marked by cultural difference is repeated in Jadine's reaction to the information that Son once killed someone and his promise not to kill her: "'Where do you think we are, in some jungle?'" (TB 178); and in the recourse both she and Son make to discourses of racialised violence in their first confrontation:

"You rape me and they'll feed you to the alligators. Count on it nigger. You as good as dead right now."

"Rape? Why you little white girls always think somebody's trying to rape you?" (TB 121)

This exchange sets the racial identity of each within paradigms of sexual violence and violent retribution which have been historically racialised in the US context through narratives of black male sexual violence and the threat of lynching. In the context in which Jadine and Son meet, these historical narratives are staged in a scene in which the racial identity of the participants is radically destabilised through Jadine's projection of an African cultural ethnicity onto Son, and Son's mocking designation of Jadine as white. Further, in the scene in which this performance of roles of aggressor and victim takes place, the historical mechanisms of violence which guarantee racial identity under these discourses no longer operate reliably. Valerian, as the holder of white-identified power in the novel, does not threaten Son with violence, but invites him to join their household, and the threat of rape and retribution for rape is never actualised in this context in any way which confirms its discursive power within the narrative of racial difference.

Son deracialises Jadine's identity as a "little white girl" (TB 121) and she responds with an angry denial: "I am not white! [...] if you think you can get away with telling me what a black woman is or ought to be..." (TB 121). The mobility of black identity in this scene and throughout the novel implies a tension between the literal referent of the racially visible body and narratives of the subject of racial identity which posit a stable identity within a complex of identity discourses which extend beyond race.

This doubling of identity leads to competing claims concerning the authenticity of identity, yet like the discourses of violence and retribution described above, claims to authenticity made within the novel do not result in the stabilisation of meaning or identity.

Jadine's relationship to questions of racial identity is figured in the novel by a tension between surface appearance and the problematic possibility of an inner reality. As suggested above, she identifies herself through a desire for an image of inner consistency and originality which is not sustained by her interactions with others. Jadine is both a model, invested in the presentation of surface appearances, and a visual artist who seeks to connect the inscription of surface effects with internal appearances. Jadine's visual response to Son is a desire to draw his face in a way which captures his identity and settles the question of her relationship to him. Her wish "to sketch him and get it over with" (TB 159) expresses a desire to finalise his meanings through a visual representation of surface effect which refers to the non-surface. This tension between surface effect and interior meaning characterises Jadine's interactions with Son and with the black women she encounters. The African woman in the yellow dress who spits at Jadine, and the tar women of her dreams and fantasies, show Jadine encountering the relationship between surface and interiority in a way which is characterised by tropes of contamination and authenticity, and structured by fear and desire. Echoing Margaret's hysterical reaction to Son's presence with her fear of "Black sperm" (TB 85) as the essence of Son's dangerous and criminal otherness, Jadine's response to Son's claim that he can "smell her" (TB 122) initiates a fear of contamination which is also a fear of exposure: while Margaret fears literal penetration and the evidence of potential penetration through the externalised 'rape' of her clothes, Jadine's accusation of animality towards Son is turned back upon her through the implication that she too contains an indelible if invisible trace of this animal nature, one she must hide from others. Jadine's desire for an inner consistency then seems to be a desire for an identity of absence and existential purity rather than the possibility of a materialised inner being.

Jadine's fear of a lack of authenticity revolves around images of black women who she perceives to be more authentic than herself. The presence of these women is threatening to the value of the mobile identity Jadine has constructed as a cosmopolitan traveller in the modern world. Jadine inhabits a number of apparent racial identities - her

self identification as a “black woman,” Son’s dismissal of her as a “white girl,” her professional identity as “the copper Venus” (TB 115) and her status as “[t]he yalla” (TB 299), to the islanders. The mobility of her identity echoes her physical mobility as she travels between the worlds of the island, New York, the town of Eloë and Europe, and represents a freedom of movement which contrasts with her perception of iconic images of black women who are static, in memory or dreams. Yet the relationship between Jadine and her real and imagined interlocutors cannot be decided through the distribution of labels of authenticity or inauthenticity. As Emberley suggests:

Jadine figures as a limit case in identity politics; her white, black, and copper masks are not simply facades that, once disclosed, will reveal an original identity. There is no hidden essence underneath the make-up of her subjectivity. She is a transnational first-world black woman. (427)

While Jadine’s transnational identity permits her the mobility to move between different racial and national positions in a manner which seems emblematic of the multicultural ideal of the period suggested above, her mobility is based upon an economic foundation which she fails to acknowledge. While Jadine credits Valerian with financially supporting her development (TB 228) she fails to acknowledge the fact that her aunt and uncle have paid for this support through their service. Ondine and Sydney have contributed their savings to her development, which fosters their dependence on Valerian (TB 267), yet she rejects the possibility that this has had an impact on their freedom (TB 282) or that she owes them anything in return (283). Jadine accepts the naturalisation of Ondine and Sydney’s service to Valerian in terms of a market of exchange in which they are free agents, a market of exchange which reflects the free market ideology of the West which fosters yet denies relationships of domination and dependence in the international market and the possibility of the under-development of the third world as a result (Rodney).

While Jadine images a world of free movement and relationships of free exchange, Son’s self-fashioning is based upon images of stasis and stability located in the domestic space of Eloë, his home town in the United States. Like all geographic regions in the novel, the US is subject to multiple representations, from the voracious predator illustrated by Son’s Mexican shipmate (TB 168) to the cosmopolitan centre of New York which is itself an island, yet Son seeks to set Eloë off from this multiple identity. Imagining his home as American he wishes to return “Not to the sticky-red

place, but to his home in it. That separate place that was presided over by wide black women in snowy dresses and was ever dry, green and quiet" (TB 168). The role of women as guardians of culture is crucial to Son's vision of Eloë; he himself is as much marked by mobility as Jadine, as an itinerant traveller keeping the company of such literary antecedents as "Huck Finns," "Nigger Jims," and "Calibans" (TB 167). These mobile, anarchic ancestors are notably all male; in contrast, Son is repeatedly imagined in the company of mythic images of femininity marked not by wanderlust but by their timelessness and consistency, such as the feminised land and sea into which he jumps at the beginning of the novel (TB 1-3), and the consistent presence of the nurturing black women of Eloë itself. However, the romantic idyll of Eloë imaged by Son conceals the violence of his past there (TB 175), and Son's location in the novel is characterised more consistently by a trajectory of escape rather than stasis or stability. While Son mythologises his "original dime" (TB 171) Jadine attempts to locate this dime in history rather than mythology, to ask what was given in exchange for the dime (TB 274-5). While Son continually moves forward on a trajectory of escape, he does so in the denial of effects of the past and his place within history. This culminates in the final image of the novel which sees him again in the moment of escape, but crucially the question of where this movement will take him remains unanswered. The representation of geographic spaces in the novel as layered with identity raises the question of whether any space remains open into which Son can escape. Although the mythic past appears to be open to him, this is potentially only a space of nostalgic stasis. Similarly, while Homi Bhabha suggests that as a consequence of the effects of migration and colonialism "The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin" (Bhabha, "DissemiNation" 291), the nature of Son's national identity is no more secure or stable than Jadine's transnational identity; views of the United States from the island displace it from the centre of the global imaginary and inscribe America as an unhomey place (TB 152, 155) within which African American identity is a site of division as much as identity formation.

I want to suggest that *Tar Baby*, of all of Morrison's novels, is most critical of and most pessimistic with regard to the internal divisions of African American identity and possibilities of the articulation of a black American identity which may be politically useful. The potential divisions of African American identity, as suggested by the mobile

and strategic nature of racial identity as exhibited by Jadine and Son, repeatedly appears as a site of penetration and potential and real violence. In this reading I want to draw on the significance of an episode of ambivalently represented sexual violence in the text; the suggestion that Son rapes Jadine and that this is the motor for her departure from their relationship. That a rape occurs at all is only obscurely referenced in the novel; Jadine and Son engage in what is obviously a violent struggle, but this appears in the text as an exchange of dialogue:

“I got a story for you.”
 “Get out of my face.”
 “You’ll like it. It’s short and to the point.”
 “Don’t touch me. Don’t you touch me.”
 “Once upon a time there was a farmer - a white farmer...”
 “Quit! Leave me *alone*!”
 “And he had this bullshit bullshit bullshit farm. And a rabbit. A rabbit came along and ate a couple of his... ow... cabbages.”
 “You better kill me. Because if you don’t, when you’re through, I’m going to kill you.”
 “Just a few cabbages, you know what I mean?”
 “I am going to kill you. *Kill* you.” (TB 273)

The violence implied in this episode is never clearly stated, but it takes place in their bedroom, apparently on their bed (TB 273) and afterwards Son is said to fear “that he had gone too far” (TB 274). When he returns, Jadine is naked beneath a t-shirt and Son is said to have “produced that nakedness and having soiled it, it shamed him” (TB 275). Later, discussing her relationship with Son with Ondine, Jadine alludes ambiguously to what has happened between them, saying that Son hit her “among other things” (TB 281). It is difficult to interpret this scene as anything other than an instance of rape, but the implications of this violence and the ambiguity of its representation are complex.¹⁹ As John Duvall notes, readings of the novel and of this scene in the novel have rarely explored the issue of sexual violence (107). The repetition of racialised images of imagined sexual violence earlier in novel, discussed above, sets this episode at a distance from these stereotypes of black male sexuality as does the ambiguity of its representation. However, as Duvall suggests, a continuum exists between Son’s desire to penetrate Jadine’s consciousness with his images of African American femininity (108), the processes of education as cultural and pedagogical penetration which form the locus of many of the disputes between them, and the event of rape itself, which occurs as

¹⁹ However, this scene has not been unanimously interpreted in this way: Trudier Harris, for example, says of Son that, despite his sexual aggressiveness, he “certainly does not rape anyone” (120).

the culmination of a violent ideological argument on the status of racial identity in which Son denies the possibility of a mixed racial identity. "There are no 'mixed' marriages. It just looks that way. People don't mix races. They abandon them or pick them up" (TB 272). Son's racial absolutism and the sexual violence which follows this can be seen as an attempt to force Jadine into the 'correct' subject position, an exercise Duvall identifies as Son's own "violent pedagogy" (112). Therefore the possibility of sexual violence, in opposition to the stereotype of the black rapist, occurs within and impacts upon an apparently singular but always internally divided racial identity rather than through differences of racial identity constructed through a black / white binary.

The rape exists as a concealed violence within the text but also as a violence which though hidden could erupt into the text and into the lives of the characters in the same manner as the revelation of Margaret Street's abuse of her son. This contrasts with the public violences of war, terrorism and public suicide in the previous novels which are represented as taking place within a social context, even if this context must be uncovered or reinterpreted in the light of these acts of violence. While the violence which takes place between Son and Jadine is unrepresented, and recurs only as a source of confusion and doubt (TB 277-8), images of violence are transferred onto the environment: Jadine experiences both the island and Eloë through threatening nightmares of ancestral images, while Son imagines New York as a city of "crying girls split into two parts by their tight jeans, screaming at the top of their high high heels" (TB 216). While Jadine struggles to reject the iconic images of femininity she repeatedly connects with a mythic past, Son identifies the modern world of the city as inhospitable to black men and women.

The divisions created between Jadine and Son; between transnational identity versus racial absolutism, between the mythic and the modern, and between iconic images of femininity versus a multiplicity of gender identities, are not resolved at the end of the novel. Significantly, in the light of the readings of national and racial identity in the previous novels, above, the movement beyond the boundaries of the nation which takes place in *Tar Baby* does not itself signal a liberatory potential. The problematisation of racial identity carried out in the previous novels and set at a historical distance from the events of *Tar Baby*, does not achieve resolution in a modern era which is marked by the development of a global context of identity. This opening up of the world to the

inscription of racial identity however is still marked by hierarchies of power, and as the novel suggests, Valerian, the representative of a capitalist and imperialist power, remains “the center of everything” (TB 281). While Jadine rejects a vision of femininity which she experiences as suffocating and oppressive, this rejection is marked by a denial of the past (TB 274) and by her presence at the end of the novel in a place without location - an airplane in mid flight. At this point Jadine’s consciousness is submerged in a description of the life of a soldier ant. This is marked by regeneration - one of the accusations Jadine faces is that she does not know how to take her place in a line of descent and nurturing (TB 283) - but I would argue that the soldier ant image is precisely the opposite of nurturing as it appears to be imagined elsewhere in the novel. The soldier may ensure the survival of her offspring, but there is no indication that this physical survival implies a cultural tradition: “Bearing, hunting, eating, fighting burying. No time for dreaming” (TB 294). The soldier ant is atomistic, “She seals herself off from all society” (TB 293), echoing Jadine’s claim to be definitively alone: “Of course I’m by myself. When haven’t I been by myself” (TB 277). Jadine’s movement at the end of the novel then is into the no-place of a global culture characterised by a multiculturalism which reduces racial identity to signs of cultural difference, such as art and museum artifacts, and which signals the loss of the means to recognise relationships of dominance and oppression.

The apparently open space into which Jadine moves then is already marked by the reification of racial identity as cultural and traditional, rather than potentially political or oppositional, and her desire to escape the strictures of race must be seen in this light: she is not a subject-in-crisis which implies the possibility of a more stable identity located elsewhere (Emberley 416), but the product of a new discourse of racial identity as cultural identity. Son, by contrast, attempts to create spaces which can be securely divided from the modern world, yet which are located through access to a mythic past and which stand in danger of ironically repeating the cultural reification of black identity in the multicultural modern world through its denial of history. Many readings of the novel have centred upon the need to distribute Jadine and Son’s positions on an axis of positivity and negativity. I would argue that in the face of the complexities of a global and multicultural world, both produce images of racialised identities which reify a cultural identity and which is set at a distance from the modern, through the spatial

distribution of places in which a racialised identity may be possible. As a result of this reification of identity, the violence which takes place between them is unspeakable to the extent that it fails to conform to the stereotypes of sexual violence which both characters make use of early in the novel. The imposition of a model of sexual violence structured by black / white difference overdetermines the meaning of this violence to the extent that, under Son and Jadine's shifting and mobile racial identities, the moment of violence, like the oppression contained within structures of exchange, becomes almost invisible. The multicultural, transnational world which offers an escape from the problematic national identity of African Americans then does not resolve the problems of racial difference and racial identity, but sets these identities in a new context marked by the reification of culture and the spatial division of the world into zones of the past and the future, and of static tradition versus atomistic individuality.

Through their interaction with narratives of national identity and racial belonging in the United States in the twentieth century, these novels illuminate the ways in which definitions of violence as public and private have shaped the relationship between black Americans and the possibilities of their access to national identities. By setting Sula, Song of Solomon and Tar Baby in the context of debates on the political meaning of black identity in the United States in this period, in both official discourses of civic identity and black political movements, it becomes clear that these novels are deeply concerned with the relationship between individual acts of violence and the role and place of the individual in the community and the nation. The role of borders in marking the inside and outside of fields of permissible violence and establishing zones of security is profoundly destabilised in these texts, and the effects produced when these borders are crossed are exhibited as much in changing ideologies of violence as by changes in status or identity. Therefore, the representation of violence and identity on the border of the nation and the boundaries of national identity, in these novels, appears to suggest a reflexive relationship between national identity and the deployment and justification of violence, by which the social, psychological, and legal meaning of violence depends upon the relationship of the violent individual with the state. Further, this relationship between the individual and the state creates conditions under which an escape from the threat of violence, through flight, escape, global travel or even the

symbolic power of National Suicide Day, is not possible. In part this is because the borders patrolled by violence remain permeable, from the borders of the nation threatened by war to the violent imaginative and physical penetration of bodies staged as internally liminal and transnational.

3.

Violence, Narrative and the Law: the Logic of Identity and the Representation of Criminality

Throughout this analysis of Toni Morrison's work I have suggested that it is crucial to recognise and account for the relationships of force which structure black life in the United States. Power and authority are implicated in the production and reproduction of images of blackness and the problems of establishing identities outside of these authorised images. To account for these relationships of force requires not only challenging the images of black life produced under them but also the authority under which they are produced, and in this section I wish to examine the effects of the force of law upon the construction of identity within Morrison's work, specifically in the novels Beloved and Jazz. These texts deconstruct relationships of force under the law through the representation of characters who carry out acts of violence yet whose designation as criminal or victim cannot be securely fixed.

I want to examine in particular the dichotomous category of identity produced by the division between the legal and the illegal, or the criminal and the law-abiding. In Discipline and Punishment, Foucault argues that the notion of fit citizenship in eighteenth and nineteenth century European states shifted from an assessment of obedience, or otherwise, to the law of the nation, to the identification of categories of persons whose ability to obey the law was predicated on their status as normal or abnormal within society. Where previously lawlessness began with the commission of an act which violated the law and which therefore made clear the law's demand for obedience, Foucault argues that modern lawlessness came to be identified as the potential for lawlessness found in the individual who subsequently, as a result, commits

a criminal act. In this new account of lawlessness, the criminality of the individual is pathologised as unnatural, read as emerging from the condition of the individual and in contrast to the 'healthy' individual, whose health, and indeed humanity, now stems in part from his obedience to the laws of society. The humanity of the individual therefore becomes an object of the law, through the definition of the criminal as unnatural and aberrant. By pathologising the criminal individual, this conception of the law and the relationship between the law and those subjected under it removes from view the authority with which the law demands obedience.

One of the effects of the structural invisibility of the authority of the law, as has been noted by many African American critics, is the displacement of concepts of racial difference from the allegedly neutral and objective discourse of the law onto concepts of identity which produce a discourse of black criminality in interracial conflicts read under the law. Patricia Williams identifies this as the production of a concept of "black antiwill" which she defines as "the antithetical embodiment of pure will" (219), which defines the relationship of black citizens to (white) American law as

a relation in which partializing judgments, employing partializing standards of humanity, impose generalizing inadequacy on a race: if 'pure will' or total control equals the perfect white person, then impure will and total lack of control equals the perfect black person. (219-20)

Therefore, although Foucault's reading of modern law as the identification and production of criminality at the level of the individual stands to the extent to which the authority of the law is therefore obscured, this account must be balanced by recognition of the production of a racial other within American society that produces an identity under the law that is still open to the label of the criminal, but which can be extended to the members of a group.

In the essay "Force of Law," Derrida suggests that the structural invisibility of the authority of the law can be challenged by the criminal, "someone who, in defying the law, lays bare the violence of the legal system, the juridical order itself" (33). As has been suggested above, many of Morrison's texts contain outlaw figures who challenge the discourses which seek to make their actions meaningful in terms of simple binaries of violence and non-violence. The status of the outlaw in American literature has traditionally been restricted as the possession of the individual white male whose challenge to social conventions is inscribed within the condition of individuality defined by this identity, and is therefore possible to suggest that such an outlaw figure confirms,

rather than challenges, the law (Spelman and Minow 314-5). In opposition to this, African American critics such as bell hooks (Outlaw Culture; Yearning) and Monica J. Evans have sought to reclaim an oppositional outlaw status for black, and particularly black women's, culture. I want to suggest that Morrison's evocation of the figure of the outlaw cannot be read as simply oppositional because of the extent to which the outlaw continues to be caught up in the logic of identity and of the law which constructs the division between the legal and illegal. Rather, Morrison's outlaw figures are represented within narratives which challenge not only the trope of the criminality of black identity, but also the relations of force and narrative structures which make black identity available to such a construction. Therefore Morrison's displacement of tropes of black criminality takes place through a deconstruction of the logic of identity which revisualises the authority of the law within the construction of outlaw identities.

Sethe's Act: the rule of (slave) law and the problem of justice in Beloved

Toni Morrison's fifth novel, Beloved, reimagines the history of African Americans held under slavery in the United States through the story of a slave mother who commits infanticide rather than allow her children to grow up under slavery. The novel is based on the true story of a slave mother called Margaret Garner (Morrison and Naylor 584). Beloved is probably Morrison's most celebrated novel; its publication established her as one of, if not the, foremost black American women writers at a time when the works of black women writers were being increasingly recognised and celebrated in the United States (Peterson 464-5). Beloved, which has since also been made into a film, has become a canonical text and produced a mass of academic commentary, yet it remains a difficult text which forces upon the reader an awareness of an ethical drive in literary interpretation through its complex narrative strategy and the ambivalence with which the central act, Sethe's act of violence against her daughter and the apparent resulting return of this child, is represented. As Kristin Boudreau rightly notes, a central question the novel appears to ask is how cycles of violence such as those marking slavery and the intraracial and interracial relationships of American society can be ended, rather than reproduced, given the historical burden that these relationships carry (447). Any account of a historical event such as slavery implies a duty of care to the past, and Morrison's novel has not escaped controversy on this account,¹ yet the anti-realism of the narrative structure and gothic elements of the plot suggest that the novel should be read as a reflection on and transformation of the slave narrative tradition which has previously represented this history, rather than as a straightforward addition to this tradition (Boudreau 448). However, the anti-realist strategies of the narrative do not subvert the need for historical responsibility on the part of the novel or the demand for a critical and ethical practice on the part of the reader, and identifications of the novel as a postmodern work have rightly been at pains to emphasise that this must be seen as an example of a "critical postmodernism" (Pérez-Torres 696; Davis "Postmodern

¹ See for example Stanley Crouch's highly critical review of the novel ("Aunt Medea").

Blackness”).

One of the key challenges the novel issues then is that of doing justice to the history of slavery, and by implication doing justice to the victims of slavery represented in the novel. The question that occurs then is why this story, and why these victims? The novel centres around an episode of violence which resists the easy distribution of identities of victim and criminal, and once again, Morrison’s close attention to instances of intraracial violence produces a complex narrative of racial identity in the context of American society which resists the stabilisation of such identities. The preponderance of critical attention has focused upon the implications of the violence of the novel, and the legacy of slavery contained in this violence, for the black community, and as in Morrison’s other works, the narrative condones this attention through a detailed examination of black community and family life which confines white characters and white society to the peripheries. I intend to argue once again that the boundary between these communities is contested and crossed from both sides, that neither remains immune from the influence of the other. I also want to suggest that the relationship between intraracial and interracial issues of identity is particularly fraught in Beloved and in the critical responses to the novel because of the centrality of violence and the ambivalence with which the possibilities of confining or criminalising this violence are represented. Through a critical deconstruction of narratives of justice and individual responsibility in the context of slavery and racial discrimination, the novel seriously questions the possibility of the cessation of violence, particularly interracial violence.

The relationship between images of blackness and the authorising forces of American society which produce and reproduce such images outwith the control or consent of African American citizens has been the subject of a great deal of Morrison’s own non-fiction work. This includes her readings of American Africanism in Playing in the Dark, and her interventions in such celebrated legal events as the Hill / Thomas case in Race-ing Power, En-gendering Justice and the O.J Simpson trial in Birth of a Nation’Hood. As Richard Schur has suggested, traces of Morrison’s critical commentary on the legal ideology of racial identity in the United States can be found in her fictional work, which recounts episodes of conflict which could stand as legal cases within narratives which displace or refuse the structures and forms of legal discourse. Therefore the representation of black identity in her work is a site of contested authority,

and the role of law in the production of authority comes under question in Beloved. In particular, the legal status of African Americans under slavery versus their centrality and narrative authority in the novel produces a conflict of authority over the status of the individual, the application of law and the possibility of justice.

Throughout this argument I will make reference to Derrida's discussion of the aporia of law and justice in the essay "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" to suggest that Sethe's case stands as a demonstration of this aporia to the extent that her case cannot appear before the law in such a way that justice could be done to her and her act. This results from the distribution of identities under the law available to her as either a mother held under slavery or as the subject of a liberal democracy - a citizenship she cannot claim. Under the relationships of force which produce Sethe's identity, her act cannot be contained within the binary division of criminal or victim, and therefore her case contests the law's claim to make such distinctions and the possibility of justice therefore being done to her. Within this essay, Derrida stresses the violence implicit in the production of the law, and this is a violence which must continually be read alongside the violence of Sethe's action in the novel. Initially though, I will examine the production of identity under authority which I suggest is critical to reading the novel. I will then go on to examine this issue in the context of American liberal ideology.

In his introduction to The Making of Political Identities, Ernesto Laclau describes the constitutive lack in identity in terms of authority. He argues that identity achieves the status of a law through this constituting lack because identity is therefore not validated through its content but through its ability to create order, to be authoritative:

If the lack is truly constitutive, the act of identification that tries to fill it cannot have a source of justification external to itself, since the order with which we identify is accepted, not because it is considered as valuable in terms of the criteria of goodness or rationality which operate at its bases, but because it brings about the possibility of *an* order, of a certain regularity.[...] one approves of the Law because it is Law, not because it is rational. In a situation of radical disorganization there is a need for *an* order, and its actual contents become a secondary consideration. This means that, between the ability of a certain order to become a principle of identification and the actual contents of that order, there is no necessary link. (3)

Here Laclau clearly distinguishes the moral content of a law from its practice, and argues that the 'legality' of the law is not a product of its morality, but of its ability to create an order which conceals the lack within identity, and which therefore allows identity to be productive, to continue the process of identification and ordering which takes place

under its name. If the social function of the law, as Laclau suggests, is the production of order through principles of identification, then we need to ask towards what this production is directed, and whose interests the establishment of “*an order*” (any particular order) favours.

Laclau emphasises the role of the law in the production of order, and hence the “productivity” of knowledge of identity over its truth status. Identity is produced and productive, and the power of identity is not located in its “truth”, but in its enforceability as a truth-effect. “Law is always an authorized force, a force that justifies itself or is justified in applying itself, even if this justification may be judged from elsewhere to be unjust or unjustifiable” (Derrida, “Force” 5). Hence, enforceability is not secondary or anterior to the law; something is not law unless it can be enforced, even if a convention of non-enforcement has arisen. As a result, the identity of the law is not found in ‘truth’, but in power. Identity, which as the self-same aspires to the status of law, expels both contradiction and the question of origins from its own self-construction. In the essay “Before the Law,” Derrida suggests that in the construction of the law as law, it is this act of construction, in effect the question of the *legality* of the law which remains unspoken.

What remains invisible and concealed in each law is thus presumably the law itself, that which makes laws of these laws, the being-law of these laws. The question and the quest are ineluctable, rendering irreversible the journey toward the place and the origin of the law. (192)

In this essay, through a reading of a section of Kafka’s The Trial, Derrida attempts to read the law not through its content, but through its genre, through the rules of construction which might be identified as “*the law of the law*” (191). He suggests that the law is generically distinct from fiction, in that it should not give rise to stories. This is because the ‘story’ of the law is that it has no story - it is a story of non-origin. If the law were to give rise to stories, this would give rise to a history of the law, which would stand in opposition to the categorical authority of the law. A history of the law would place the law in relation to its objects, a relation which would compromise the authority of the law over those objects and allow the individual experience, as a case before the law, to challenge the law itself.

One problem of the law then is the production of a language which is adequate to it; a language which can reflect the law as identical with itself. The impossibility of such a language is the condition of narrative and of the need for interpretation. In

Beloved, Morrison presents a series of highly individual cases before the law, that challenge the reader to take up a position of judgment, while at the same time questioning the possibility of judgment. The novel posits a number of competing sources of authority which place and displace each other as productive sources of knowledge. I now want to examine more closely the field of discourses of authority and identity which I believe the novel places itself within, to suggest that Beloved, among other things, stands as a critical commentary on the authority of identities.

The ideology of citizenship in the United States is central to conceptions of legal identity, and the tension between an ahistorical conception of citizenship as an essentialised belonging and real historical exclusions from this category has been noted in the previous chapter. Debate over conceptions of legal identity as an expression of identity politics versus the ideal of a colourblind judicial system have already been discussed, but in the context of Beloved and its critical intervention into the question of legal and illegal identities, I wish to briefly examine the broader history of concepts of identity and citizenship under the ideology of American liberalism and its relationship to American racism. In particular, this argument seeks to demonstrate the tension at the heart of liberal concepts of legal personality, between the legacy of concepts of natural law and the production of positive law, and the effects this has had upon the production of identities of racial others authorised under the law.

In Race: The History of an Idea in the West, Ivan Hannaford contrasts civic identity as found in classical political texts with notions of political identity and human nature in early modern and Enlightenment political theories. In classical political systems, Hannaford suggests, the civic community existed in separation from the tribal and kin identities which structured daily life. While tribal identity was based on a sense of shared identity and belonging, civic identity and civic community were structured around association. Therefore civic identity existed as already another identity to the personal identity of kin and tribal structures, and contained within it a sense of difference. Civic identity existed as a means of relating to others within the civic community, and the nature of this relationship was political and relational rather than personal and identical. Therefore, Hannaford suggests, in classical political theory, race is an antonym of politics because civic identity existed to negotiate between different tribal or kin identities, and 'politics' identified this process of civic negotiation (9-14).

In this formulation then, civic identity is specifically ‘unnatural’ because it must act as a means of negotiating between ‘natural’ identities of tribe or kin. As an unnatural identity, civic identity is the possession of none, but is instead a means of relating identities.

In Hannaford’s argument, the construction of a ‘civic identity’ which is distinct from tribal, or racial, identity, is an attempt to stabilise the relationship between racial identity and political identity. Hannaford’s argument is part of a body of work which is engaged in locating or constructing a political identity which is ‘empty’ of specific differences such as race, class and gender, as an abstract identity (whether ‘citizen’ or ‘agent’) through which the specific and localised individual can function in relation to the political ‘whole,’ however conceived. Hannaford looks to a classical tradition of civic relations that he argues was disrupted by early modern and Enlightenment political theories which reconceived the concept of human nature to theorise the political no longer as a deliberate and strategic alienation of identity, but as a natural identity. Where classical civic identity produced a political identity which stood apart from the ‘natural’ identity of tribe or kin, early modern political thought posited a ‘human’ identity which contains within it a political identity, or more precisely a political nature; from this conception arises the concept of human rights, naturally possessed by each individual. This human identity relates neither to the tribal, ‘natural’ identity nor the political civic identity of classical thought, because it posits an identity which is at once political *and* natural. “The rights, duties and obligations which once flowed from a politics that *released* man from Nature are now seen to be *in* Nature and directly derived from it regardless of the postulates of politics” (Hannaford 12). Where previously political identity came *after* natural and individual identity, and was only a product of a certain denial of this identity through a meeting with other identities in the civic community, early modern political humanism suggests that human identity is always already political, as a result of the identification of the human with the political within Enlightenment thought. Within this reading of early modern and Enlightenment humanism, access to the political takes place through and in opposition to an idea of ‘the natural’. In the work of John Locke and of John Stuart Mill, among others, man’s political identity is developed through the contradictions between his ‘natural’ past and his interaction with a more complex society in the modern world. Difference is located in the distinction between man’s natural state, and his social state, the result of this

difference being the political identity through which social relations take place. Hence the 'empty' subject of politics which Hannaford claims for classical civic identity, and which certain forms of liberalism aspire to,² is problematically identified with an idea of the human which can perform inclusions and exclusions.

Early modern and Enlightenment political philosophy have been hugely influential upon modern liberal politics, which, broadly defined, forms the dominant mode of political thought in United States politics.³ As a result, despite the claims of the founding documents of the Republic to establish rights for "all", questions of political identity in American thought have historically been shaped by a distinction between an idealised political subject, with access to the privileges as well as responsibilities of the political and social world, and subjects who have not and cannot achieve this status. These distinctions obviously map on to the contours of discrimination, on the basis of race, gender and class, which have shaped many modern societies, yet crucially this formulation of difference - the difference between the politically able and the politically unable, perhaps - presents a difference within which the specific differences of race, class and gender cannot be named. Once again, the subject of political identity has been emptied of its content, but this does not take place through the deliberate alienation of identity which Hannaford finds in classical civic politics, but through an ability to ascend to the level of the social and political whose source is unnamed, and potentially unnameable. This has serious implications for the politics of difference.

Modern liberal theory seeks to displace specific difference in the interests of a general, universalised humanity through which politics can operate.

Although liberalism advocates tolerance in the face of diversity, this tolerance is grounded in the recognition of the universal capacities all human beings share. Thus the traditional liberal conception of citizenship has rested on the belief that differences, be they in terms of gender, race or ethnicity, should not affect our standing as citizens. Whereas individuals may differ with regard to their social background, history, biology and the beliefs and values they subscribe to, liberals have tended to view these differences as merely contingent and inconsequential compared to the features all human beings hold in common. It is these shared, universal criteria which provide the basis

² The obvious example of such liberal thought in American political theory is John Rawls. In his work, the political agent operates from "behind a veil", implying the possibility of an ideal Kantian reasoner whose choices are not the result of any particular social or political situation: see A Theory of Justice.

³ See for example Louis Hartz The Liberal Tradition in America; J David Greenstone The Lincoln Persuasion.

for formal legal and political equality. Hence difference and particularity are to be relegated to the private sphere. In the political arena citizens should transcend their differences and act on the basis of the common good or 'general will'. (Baumeister, 6)

This demonstrates that the liberal politics of difference is founded on an underlying sameness - "the universal capacities all human beings share." The human appears as the "given" within this ideology of the political subject, yet the content of the apparently empty and universal "human" within liberal discourse has been continually inscribed with detail in American history.⁴

In "Liberalism and Racism: The Problem of Analyzing Tradition", Rogers M Smith contrasts two competing foundations of American society, "liberalism" and "racism." His essay begins from the premise that these ideologies would normally be seen as contradictory, but in the course of his argument he shows not only that ideologies of liberalism and racism have historically existed side by side in the United States, but also that they may in some ways be mutually implicated.⁵ Remarking on the logical contradictions between the ideals of liberalism and the presence of racial and sexual hierarchies in American society, he suggests that "the role racist and gendered ideologies play in meeting the liberal need for more specific answers about who will bear liberal rights does more to give racism and sexism legitimacy within American political culture than anything else" (21).⁶ The "more specific" identity of the liberal

⁴ Charles Taylor, in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* criticises the naturalist explanation of morality by highlighting the ways in which a definition of morality and justice which is tied to specific ideas of the human ignores cultural and historical differences, on the one hand, and the effect of distinctions made between those deserving of moral treatment, and those excluded from the law of morality - the exceptions against which moral practices operate: "like so much else in life, this 'instinct' [for the good] receives a variable shape in culture, as we have seen. And this shape is inseparable from an account of what it is that commands our respect. The account seems to articulate intuition. It tells us, for instance, that human beings are creatures of God and made in his image, or that they are immortal souls, or that they are all emanations of divine fire, or that they are all rational agents and thus have dignity which transcends any other being, or some other such characterization: and that *therefore* we owe them respect. The various cultures which restrict this respect do so by denying the crucial description to those left outside: they are thought to lack souls, or to be not fully rational, or perhaps destined by God for some lower station, or something of the sort" (5). Hence morality is defined by claims, implicit and explicit, to human status, and naturalistic arguments are also underwritten by an ontology of moral objects.

⁵ It should be noted that Smith's conclusion does not pursue this point, but rather seeks to identify liberalism through a narrower definition which avoids the contradictions he identifies: as a result, his essay can be seen as part of the tradition of rehabilitating liberalism by immunising it from racism which he criticises in other works.

⁶ see also Ira Katznelson "Liberal Maps for Technology's Powers: Six Questions." *Social Research* 64 (1997).

subject has been constructed in terms of racial and gender inequality, but because the liberal subject exists under the discourse of equality, the terms of discrimination are posited as contingent rather than structural.⁷ This ignores the extent to which specific discourses of discrimination have developed under the auspices of the liberal subject: the failure of the liberal subject to be as empty as it claims reveals the non-identity of the liberal subject and its discourse of equality.

In the act of positing an ideal human subject of justice which claims to be blind to such specific identities, the ways in which other specific identities are contained within the discourse and application of the law are concealed. This point is argued forcibly in Patricia Williams' The Alchemy of Race and Rights, which examines the rhetoric of law and law-enforcement in a number of episodes in which the discourses of criminality and race come to the mutually implicated. Taking as examples a number of cases of violence by white citizens against black citizens, Williams demonstrates the ways in which allegedly race-neutral laws of property and territory on one hand, and violence on the other, are racialised within American popular and social discourse, through images of white and black social geographies as exclusive, and the naturalisation of violence in the image of young black males. While the response to these cases among the participants and the public are expressed in specifically racial terms, and the victims and aggressors are identified by racial difference, this racial dimension is not recognised anywhere in the law. The possibility that race is a factor in these cases cannot be recognised by a law formulated on the abstract human subject who is racially neutral, and racial difference in these cases is translated into discourses of perceived threat and especially the distribution of territory. Race here enters the condition of the *differend* as described by Lyotard:

a damage [*dommage*] accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage.[...] to the privation constituted by the damage there is the added impossibility of bringing it to the knowledge of others, and in particular to the knowledge of a tribunal. (5)

In the cases Williams cites, the discourse of race and the discourse of legality cannot operate simultaneously. As a result, not only can racial discrimination not be proved, but

⁷ See David Greenstone The Lincoln Persuasion: Remaking American Liberalism, and David Erikson "Dew, Fitzhugh, and Proslavery Liberalism." Both of these comment on the use of liberal ideology in pro-slavery arguments, suggesting that the pro-slavery stance represents a particular working out of a humanist liberal ideology. As a result, racism is removed as a motivating factor in slavery, and the racial character of slavery becomes contingent, rather than structural.

it is arguable that it becomes impossible for the law to be racist, because the question of race in these instances is not open to the law. While acts of discrimination may take place, and may be recognised within the application of the law, this fault can only be ascribed to those who enforce the law. The status of the law itself remains unchallenged through the absence of content in the subject of the law. We remain before the law, rather than in it.⁸

Williams argues further that such absences can be found in the Constitution of the United States, and the Constitutional Amendments; that these founding documents of American political, social and spiritual identity produce a subject of the law in 'man' whose race and (alleged) gender neutrality conceals, rather than prevents, the exclusion of black Americans and women not only from political representation, but also from the subject of the human.

Blacks and woman are the objects of a constitutional omission which has been incorporated into a theory of neutrality. It is thus that omission becomes a form of expression, as oxymoronic as that sounds: racial omission is a literal part of original intent: it is the fixed reiterated prophesy of the Founding Fathers. (121)

In the Constitution and Constitutional Amendments, race and gender are made present through the legalisation of their absence - the amendments do not give rights to women, or black Americans, but outlaw discrimination on the basis of race or sex. In a way, the category of the human (those who have a right to legal representation) has been expanded into space which was previously, apparently, empty. At the heart of *Beloved*, I will suggest, is an attempt to account for this absence at the heart of the idea of the human.

The problematic neutrality of the concept of the 'human' under which citizenship is defined is however not simply an absence, but is shaped by ideologies of freedom and of property which structure the concept of the individual. The concept of freedom holds a privileged place in American iconography and self-identity. The historical identification of the American Republic as the 'land of the free' defined the relationship between America and its former colonial masters, rejecting not only a relationship of domination and subordination between the colony and the Empire, but also the idea of monarchy and hierarchy as the basis for social structure. The democracy

⁸ It is also interesting to note that Williams' style, which includes autobiographical detail, folk tales, and personal accounts and media reportage as well as legal proceedings, can be seen as an attempt to 'tell stories' about the Law.

which emerged from this was obviously incomplete, but the democratic ideal produced by the struggle for freedom of the United States as a self-constituting and free entity maintains the highest position in present day American self-fashioning. Slavery, as a reality of American history, stands in direct contrast to this democratic ideal, and as a result stands in a problematic relationship to the iconography of freedom. As a result, slavery as a historical phenomenon has at various times been portrayed as anachronistic, as limited geographically and therefore not of national significance, or as benign, through representations of a benevolent and patriarchal American slavery and the threat of an ultra-violent indigenous African slavery.⁹ Much work has been done in recent years, by African American commentators and others, to challenge and overthrow historical accounts which attempt to nullify or expel slavery from the American past, and Beloved can be seen as part of this tradition, through its attempt to reconstruct the experience of slavery and emphasis on the difficulty of this act of 'rememory' and representation. In this section I aim to examine the ways in which the novel, through its treatment of slavery as an institution, problematises the idea of freedom not simply through the presence of slavery, but also outside slavery, in 'free' society.

In his reading of freedom and society in the wake of the Second World War, Theodor Adorno reminds us that freedom cannot be read outside the historical conditions of its production. He suggests that freedom in western philosophy exists within a paradox of the free and the unfree, where the freedom of the individual will is necessarily curtailed by the need to live socially. However, this only appears as a paradox within a reading of freedom which sees freedom as an essential quality of the human, and which can therefore posit a 'free will' which has a distinct existence outside the relation of the individual to the social. This concept of a free and individual will is not natural, but historical: "Whole epochs, whole societies lacked not only the concept of freedom but the thing" (Adorno 218). The naturalisation of freedom as a human attribute produces freedom as an objective noumenon existing outside of individuals and societies, and posits freedom as a transhistorical, transnational object available to all. This removes freedom from the historical conditions of its production and therefore

⁹ Slavery of course is not the only example which contradicts the self-image of freedom and democracy: the treatment of Native Americans, and later policies and social discourses on immigration, function in a similar way in relation to mainstream discourses of freedom and democracy. For a historical overview of this topic see Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble. The Free and the Unfree: A New History of the United States.

produces an ideal of freedom which suggests that freedom is always to some extent available (the demand that oppressed societies should free themselves, or could free themselves if they tried, is an example of this), and which obscures the limits of freedom in supposedly free societies. As Zygmunt Bauman argues in *In Search of Politics*, there is a logical contradiction between the beliefs about freedom he finds in the contemporary West: primarily, the co-present beliefs that the West has achieved the freedom of the individual, and that the individual has no hope of influencing the political realm. The source of this logical contradiction may be found in the construction of freedom itself.

Adorno identifies a specific modern historical demand for a philosophy of freedom in the rise of a capitalist bourgeoisie in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Philosophy had an unexpressed mandate from the bourgeoisie to find transparent grounds for freedom. But that concern is antagonistic in itself. It goes against the old oppression and promotes the new one, the one that hides in the principle of rationality itself. One seeks a common formula for freedom and oppression, ceding freedom to the rationality that restricts it, and removing it from empiricism in which one does not even want to see it realized. (214)

Adorno argues that the concept of freedom promoted under this philosophy is constructed through a principle of rationality which places freedom under the concept of the individual. In this construction of freedom, freedom becomes a component of rationality itself, rather than an attribute which can be measured empirically, locating freedom in the realm of the given under the concept of humanity rather than in the realm of action.

Therefore freedom must be read historically, and when we read freedom historically we see that a particular historical discourse of freedom actually produces a subject who is capable of holding 'that' freedom, rather than in possession of freedom in general. The discourse of freedom which dominates modern Western philosophy is the freedom of the rational individual, and freedom under this discourse is not simply 'freedom' as such, but the freedom of rational individuals *to be* rational individuals. The logic of identity is here reinscribed in the discourse of freedom.

Identity, the condition of freedom, is immediately and simultaneously the principle of determinism. There is a will insofar as man objectified himself into a character. Toward himself -whatever that may be - he thus becomes something external, after the model of the outward world of things that is subjected to causality. (Adorno 216-7)

Through the construction of the rational individual as identity, the individual becomes an

object in a system of identification, even to himself.

In the history of American liberalism, initiated in the founding of the Republic, freedom is characterised as the primary right of the citizen, claimed as a natural right of man, and protected by the Republic (Terchek 3). Yet the particular conditions of founding of the American Republic, and the political theory of the time, tied this notion of freedom to an equally strong notion of property. The revolutionary struggle with the colonial powers was characterised by a struggle for economic independence, at the level of the citizen and of the state. As a result, property rights become necessary to secure both the freedom of the citizen (to make freedom effective) and to tie the ends of the citizen to the ends of the Republic (Terchek). As Joyce Appleby, in her study of liberalism and republicanism as historical ideologies, suggests:

In detailing how private property arose from God's original gift of the world, Locke revealed for his contemporaries how fidelity to God's creation required a political order run for and by men who would be equally free, independent, rational and propertied. (Appleby 84)

For various purposes then, the historic inscription of freedom in American politics exists in a necessary relationship with an idea of property, and property holding, and the objectification of the "free" subject is as an object of property relations.¹⁰

Slavery can be seen paradigmatically as a system of objectification: of the production of individuals as objects under the control of others, yet this objectification, in contrast to free society, is defined as the condition of unfreedom. This unfreedom is produced through the status of those held under slavery not simply as free or unfree, but from their place within relations of property and property holding, a particular position of objecthood which American liberal ideology maps onto discourses of freedom, and of humanity. A historical instance of this can be seen in the use of images of slavery in Republican rhetoric during the struggle for Independence, where the contrast with slavery provided an image of absolute freedom, of a distinction in human type between the "two sorts of men in the world, freemen and slaves" (Adams, in Appleby 155-59). Further, the Dred Scott case, in 1857, not only confirmed the status of enslaved African Americans as property, but also excluded African Americans descended from slaves from the protections of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights on the grounds of a lack

¹⁰ For a detailed examination of the racial implications of this issue see Cheryl I. Harris. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 8, 106, 1993. 1707-1791.

of citizenship resulting from racial inferiority (Bell 1-21).¹¹

If, as is suggested above, American liberal political identity arises out of a certain conception of the human, even if this conception is various and changing, it becomes clear that the conditions of slavery must lead to a problematic relationship between those held under and identified by slavery, and the concept of humanity. In *Beloved*, this aspect of the discourse of slavery in the hands of white slave owners is clearly demonstrated in the beliefs of the schoolteacher, whose right to power over the slaves in his possession is not limited to control over their behaviour and wellbeing, but extends to a descriptive and denotative power over their identities. The schoolteacher, as a cypher of the authoritarian system of discipline of slavery which extends well beyond the physical, asserts his status over those held under slavery through the reduction of their humanity. ““No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up”” (B 193). Using the ink that Sethe has produced for him, Schoolteacher constructs an identity of ambivalent humanity which must be lined up, made sense of, according to his instructions. Although Sethe creates the capacity for his construction through her labour, only the schoolteacher and his nephews have the right to write this account. This facet of slavery is not restricted to the beliefs of the schoolteacher. The Garners are characterised by their ‘humane’ attitude to slavery, by their soft talking (B 195) and the independence of their slaves:

“Y’all got boys,” he told them. “Young boys, old boys, picky boys, stroppin boys. Now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of them. Bought em thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one.”

“Beg to differ, Garner. Ain’t no nigger men.”

“Not if you scared, they ain’t.” Garner’s smile was wide. “But if you a man yourself, you’ll want your niggers to be men too.” (B 10)

Yet it remains clear that the humanity, and the manliness, of the slave men is on license only, licensed by the man who has fathered them in the system of slavery, bought and

¹¹ It should be noted that the judgment of Chief Justice Taney, quoted by Bell, stresses that the judgment in *Dred Scott* case was made on the basis of the original intention of the authors of the Constitution, rather than contemporary opinion, and that it was not within the scope of the case to judge this original intention. Further, *Dred Scott* was quickly and frequently overturned as a legal precedent (Bell, 8, 21). However, the case demonstrates the problematic division in Constitutional law between natural and positive law as the foundation of citizenship, a division which inheres in the very founding of the Constitution as it calls upon both the establishment of a new, Republican, identity and preexisting ideas of humanity. For a further discussion of this issue, see Bonnie Honig. “Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic.” *American Political Science Review* 1, 85, 1991. 97-113.

raised. Further, the humanity and manliness of the Sweet Home men is not valued as a quality they possess themselves, but as a reflection of Garner's own status. "Garner came home bruised and pleased, having demonstrated one more time what a real Kentuckian was: one tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men" (B 11). This manhood attributed to the Sweet Home men is simultaneously a creation of and a demonstration of Garner's power and his own manhood, and the ability of the schoolteacher to remove this status is indicative of the extent to which this identity remains a possession of the slaveholder.

The identities of those held under slavery are open to manipulation by others through their difference: Sethe's difference from the 'purely human' under the schoolteacher's genealogy, the Sweet Home men's difference from men whose status does not need to be guaranteed by the name of their master's plantation. In both of these cases, the difference is obviously a racial difference, but the terms in which this difference is expressed are not always so obvious. In both of these cases, difference is expressed in terms of a capacity to achieve full humanity, and in terms of the racist diagnosis of the condition of black slaves in America under a regime codified by freedom and democracy. It is important to emphasise that slaves were not denied participation in a full humanity through their lack of access to legal and political mechanisms, but rather that the denial of legal personality and political participation was seen to result from a lack of full humanity on the part of those held under slavery. Contemporary criticism has rightly reversed the logic of this racist prescription, but I would argue that we must be careful not to miss the implications of the construction of this racist order in our desire to deny its validity. The construction of those held under slavery as inhuman is undeniably racist, but the valorisation or 'givenness' of the human within responses against this must also be registered: where do definitions of the human come from, and how are inclusions and exclusions within this category to be monitored? It is their place within the objectifying discourse of slavery which makes these identities available for construction by those identified as owners of property rather than property themselves, but the terms of this construction within slavery must be examined in their relationship to broader social ideologies of identity. *Beloved* contains a series of stagings of moments of possible freedom where the possibility of access to freedom is strategically enacted and then deconstructed. This immanent criticism of concepts of

freedom within the novel moves Morrison's narrative away from absolute ideas of freedom and unfreedom under the system of slavery, and towards a reading of freedom driven by the paradoxical construction of freedom within a society which makes freedom - for the slave or for the 'free' - impossible.

One of the primary stages of this enactment is the role of economics and economic exchange which dominate relationships between characters in the novel. As noted above, the genesis of slaves according to white owners is economic rather than natural, and the irruption of the 'economic father' within biological families had real and significant effects on the stability and nature of slave families. When the power to reproduce and to be responsible for their own reproduction is granted to those held under slavery, this takes place under the category of livestock, where slave-owners are no longer fathers but owners of "property that reproduced itself without cost" (B 228). Black characters who have gained their freedom also recognise the essentially economic condition of their freedom, and of their servitude, for example in the adopted name "Stamp Paid." However, one episode of economic "exchange" stands out. Halle, Sethe's husband, pays for his mother Baby Suggs' manumission from slavery through extra labour, working outside the Garner's holdings on his "day off" in order to pay the debt of his mother's freedom, and it is in the power of this act that Sethe's attraction to Halle is located by the narrative. "Maybe that was why she chose him. A twenty-year-old man so in love with his mother he gave up five years of Sabbaths just to see her sit down for a change was a serious recommendation" (B 11).

Halle's sacrifice / payment is read by Sethe as an act in exchange for Baby Suggs' comfort; a direct exchange between labour and comfort which is not mediated by economic value, but is an expression of love.¹² The intercession of the schoolteacher into this arrangement following the death of Mr Garner reveals both the true economic basis of the exchange, and the unequal relation between the contracting parties. While Sethe attempts to distinguish between the Garners and the schoolteacher, as "soft" or hard masters, Halle reads the exchange of his labour for Baby Suggs accurately, in economic terms rather than social effect. When Sethe attempts to distinguish the

¹² In an interview, Morrison suggests that the Western sense of love is corrupted by ideas of possession (Tate 123). Halle's relationship with Baby Suggs, and Sethe's relationship with her daughter are both disrupted by the imposition of a discourse of possession and property imposed by slavery, and Sethe's attempts to read against this, in both relationships, are failures which highlight the conflict between discourses of love and property.

Garner through the fact that they let Halle pay for his mother's freedom, he responds "“She worked here for ten years. If she worked another ten you think she'd have made it out? I pay him for her last years and in return he got you, me and three more coming up”" (B 196). While Sethe attempts to read the exchange in humanitarian terms, Halle sees the economic basis of the labour exchange. The schoolteacher forbids him to continue his work outside the Garner land, and this is not simply an example of the schoolteacher's disciplinary system but also reveals the problem of economic exchange between master and slave. When Halle tells Sethe that he is no longer allowed to work off the debt on his free days, she asks:

‘Then how you going to pay it off? How much is it?’
 ‘\$123.70.’
 ‘Don’t he want it back?’
 ‘He want something.’
 ‘What?’
 ‘I don’t know.’ (196)

Here the schoolteacher's refusal to allow Halle to work elsewhere reveals the fiction on which the contract between Garner and Halle is based. The ‘free days’ on which Halle works are a fiction if all of his time and labour, under slavery, are the possessions of his master. The precise figure owed between them becomes meaningless in the recognition, brought to the surface by the schoolmaster's rejection of ‘humane’ slavery, that Halle cannot owe one who owns him. The liberal fiction of freedom under slavery is here denied, and the “something” which the schoolteacher desires is the articulation of a control which is already present but unspoken.

In The Alchemy of Race and Rights, Patricia Williams argues that ideas of property and the ability to hold property are fundamental to the identity of contemporary American citizens. She suggests that legal personality is defined through the right to contract, to form contracts with others and to have these contracts upheld and enforced. If the basis of legal personality then is defined through contractual relations, rights under these contracts are imagined as property, held as possessions by those able to form contracts. Williams suggests that this relationship between the possession of property and the legal personality which validates this possession is reflexive: while the right to hold property is guaranteed in United States law, the possession of property has also acted to bolster the legal standing of persons under that law. Hence, for example, the homeless not only lack property, but also the rights to life, liberty, family and privacy

that property holders can securely claim. Through this expanded reading of property, Williams suggests that identity must be read as a stake in the legal and political marketplace. To take a place within this economy, identity must then be assigned a relative value which allows exchange to occur within a system of 'commodified equivalences', and the value involved here is not simply the value of economic possessions, but also emotional and moral value. Further, she suggests that the social symbology of America links images of individual freedom to freedom of access to the wealth of the nation, which is seen as a 'free' natural resource rather than in terms of possession, and particularly not in terms of competition over what might be a limited resource. This image of freedom of access, as itself a quality of the wealth of the nation, creates an image of plenitude which denies the exchange involved in contractual social relations, and the advantage and disadvantage created by these in what is a limited resource. As a result, the mythology of the American individual itself becomes a feature of the marketplace of identity.

In our legal and political system, words like 'freedom' and 'choice' are forms of currency. They function as the mediators by which we make all things equal, interchangeable. It is therefore not just what 'freedom' means, but the relation it signals between each individual and the world. (P. Williams 31)

'Freedom' and 'choice' are possessions whose identity as possessions is denied in their apparent availability to all. Slavery sets this ideology on its head. Slavery literalises the commodification of humanity, through the transformation of those held under slavery into property, a doubled identity which resonates throughout the novel in relations between black slaves and white slave-owners. The extent of this commodification and the effect of this in a society in which legal personality is based on the ability to contract, and therefore to hold possessions rather than be a possession, can be seen in the relationship between slave laws and those held under these laws. "It must be remembered that *from the experiential perspective of blacks*, there was no such thing as 'slave law.' The legal system did not provide blacks, even freed blacks, with structured expectations, promises or reasonable reliances of any sort" (P. Williams 154). Slave law, fundamentally, was *not* a contract, and in part this was because slave law was built upon the foundation that one could not be a slave, and a full legal person and therefore capable of contracting, at the same time. This is what Halle experiences in his negotiation with the schoolteacher, which can never in fact be a negotiation because there

is no contractual basis on which negotiation can take place.

Legal rights are not simply possessions, in contemporary legal theory, but also the possession of individuals. While the possession of rights to freedom, equality, and so on, is seen to guarantee these rights, the construction of such rights necessitates a particular holder of these rights, and in contemporary liberal political theory, these rights must be the possession of an individual. By viewing the individual as a historical rather than an essential figure, we can see the ways in which rights not only protect the interests of the individual, but also inaugurate an individual whose identity is legislated by the possession of these rights (Elam 78). As a result, the protection of the freedom of the individual has in some instances been equated with the protection of freedom as such, but this attention to the individual obscures the refusal of rights under other structures of identity. In Justice and the Politics of Difference, Iris Young suggests that contemporary liberal theories of justice are organised around the distribution of rights to individuals, through which individual power becomes a form of possession, and a thing in itself. Young argues against this construction of power as a possession, on the basis that it obscures the structural organisation of power through relationships which are not individual but social.

While the exercise of power may sometimes depend on the possession of certain resources - money, military equipment, and so on - such resources should not be confused with power itself. The power consists in a relationship between exerciser and others through which he or she communicates intentions and meets with their acquiescence. (31)

To focus on the individual as the locus of power as possession is to create a dyadic conception of power relations, between individuals, which does not adequately reflect the complexity of power relations in society, where the role of third parties, such as the judiciary, to exercise power on behalf of others is crucial to the actual impact of exercise of power. The distribution of power as a possession among individuals ignores the mediation of power through third parties, but also ignores the role of groups, whether in authority or in society, as identities crucial to the circulation of power as relation (I. Young 31). By reading power as domination and subordination, rather than as a quasi-material possession, the structural phenomena of power can be recognised.

By domination I mean the structures of systemic phenomena which exclude people from participating in and determining their actions or the conditions of their actions. Domination must be understood as structural precisely because the constraints that people experience are usually the intended or unintended product of the actions of many people, like the

actions which enable the judge's power. In saying that power and domination have a structural basis, I do not deny that it is individuals who are powerful and who dominate. Within a system of domination some people can be identified as more powerful and others as relatively powerless. Nevertheless a distributive understanding misses the way in which the powerful enact and reproduce their power. (Young 32)

Structures of power relations naturalise the power of individuals, and distributive paradigms are unable to challenge this naturalisation.

The relationship between individual identity and group identity is particularly problematic in minority politics, and the effects of the refusal to recognise group identities within a society and the effects of the imposition of a group identity on individuals under the authoritative gaze have been discussed in the preceding chapters. In Beloved, group identity is a paradigmatic structure of identity through the racial basis of slavery, and the issue of community solidarity and the impact of community rejection upon Sethe and her family have been discussed by many critics of Morrison's work.¹³ I want to suggest that the novel once again enacts a deconstruction of the apparent opposition between group identity and individual identity through a rejection of the separation of individual power and structural power.

As noted by Young, above, the privileging of individual identity implies a particular form of possession of power, and so makes visible only a particular form of domination - the domination of one individual over another. In the context of slavery, this creates a division between the system of slavery, and the individuals who wield power under this structure of domination. Slavery is a system, and systematic power under the discourse of the individual is not a possession of the individual but a feature of the system. Therefore, while slavery is the system under which each individual slave-owner wields power, none are, or can be, individually responsible for the system under which they act, just as the 'free individual' in Bauman's assessment, above, cannot have an impact on the political structure under which they live. This assessment of individual power, and therefore individual responsibility, is rejected within the novel at various points. Of particular resonance is Baby Suggs declaration of the guilt of "whitefolks": "“Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed,” she said, ‘and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world by whitefolks’” (B 89). Baby Suggs, who preaches a message of self love and self-identity to her black congregation, turns

¹³ see for example Gurleen Grewal Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle; Marta Caminero-Santangelo The Madwoman Can't Speak.

from this affirmation of black identity which is both racial and individual to a wholesale rejection of “whitefolks” and the abstract study of colours in the wake of Sethe’s killing of her daughter. The novel can, and has, been read as the struggle for self-identity under slavery, culminating in Sethe’s cry of “Me? Me?” (273) in the penultimate chapter, but this must be seen in the context of an apparent rejection of individuality and self-identity in the enclosure of white identity under the epithet “whitefolks” who are the source of all bad luck in the world. I would suggest that we cannot read this as a racist reduction of white identity to an essentialised racism, but a neat reversal of the frequent reading of black identity in opposition to the individuality which guarantees the freedom and equality of white identity, where individuality is not the only form of identity, and where the construction of identity through individuality makes invisible certain forms of power. Baby Suggs puts into operation a strategic rejection of white individuality which allows her to identify the cause of her pain: not individual slave-owners, but the structural oppression of slavery which is part of that individuality (the ‘white’ part) but not contained in any individual identity.¹⁴

The struggle Baby Suggs experiences in expressing her rejection of white racism reflects the problematic of establishing a group identity within a discourse such as liberal individualism which denies the existence of such an identity, in the quasi-legal terms of rights and responsibilities. As Lyotard suggests in *The Differend*, the lack of a language in which to state a wrong problematises the prosecution of that wrong, under the rationale that “Every wrong ought to be able to be put into phrases” (13). While I would argue that Morrison’s novel does not seek to found a new language of group rights, her bringing together of the discourses of individualism and the collective guilt of slavery exposes this contradiction within individualism.

This strategic rejection (rather than reduction) of white individual identity in favour of a white group identity is also put into operation in Sethe’s attempted attack on Edward Bodwin. This episode re-writes Sethe’s attack on Beloved, with the difference that she turns her violence against the approaching white man rather than against her daughter. The misidentification which makes Beloved her target in the first playing out

¹⁴ Terry Otten in *Crimes of Innocence* suggests that “The whiteness she castigates represents the dehumanizing cultural values of a society given over to profit, possession and dominance. It is a whiteness worn by blacks as well as whites” (96). As Otten suggests, the dehumanisation “whiteness” conducts in relation to “blackness” (see for example Stamp Paid’s analysis of white fear, 198) is not simply racial, or racially essentialised.

of this incident has been redirected, against the “hurter” rather than the hurt. Yet the target of Sethe’s second attack is not the schoolteacher, or even a slaveowner, but a man described by Stamp Paid as a friend of the black community.

‘He’s somebody never turned us down. Steady as a rock. I tell you something, if she had got to him, it’d be the worst thing in the world for us. You know, don’t you, he’s the main one kept her from the gallows in the first place’. (B 265)

It is only the intercession of the community which keeps Sethe from this act of damage to the community, and of violent ingratitude. Yet Edward Bodwin is also an abolitionist whose house contains racist images of black servitude and gratitude (B 255). That Sethe attacks the innocent (her daughter) rather than the guilty in the first staging of this conflict seems clear, but the question of guilt in this restaging is less clear. When responsibility is no longer located in the individual, the place of the individual within the group is problematised: the individual is neither representative of the group - ie, removed from his individuality - nor identified in separation from the group as an individual human actor who bears at most only a partial responsibility. As an encounter prefigured by Baby Suggs’ reading of white guilt, the attack on Edward Bodwin admits judgments of innocent and guilt only on the basis of Bodwin’s identity inside/outside the paradigm of slavery as a feature of white identity. The uncanny nature of the identity this creates can be seen in the reactions of Stamp Paid and Paul D, who dissolve the mystery of the event into laughter and tears (B 265),¹⁵ attempting the physical expulsion of an event which cannot be contained in language.¹⁶ Indeed, to endorse Baby Suggs’ proscription of “white folks,” and to challenge the illegality of Sethe’s action in attacking Edwin Bodwin on the basis that he is not the source of the hurt done to her (beyond that fact that her response is one of extra-judicial violence) is to challenge the rule of law which states that the subject of the law is the individual, and that the rule of law is a product of

¹⁵ “They laughed then. A rusty chuckle at first and then more, louder and louder until Stamp took out his pocket handkerchief and wiped his eyes while Paul D pressed the heel of his hand in his own. As the scene neither one had witnessed took shape before them, its seriousness and its embarrassment made them shake with laughter.” (265)

¹⁶ A similar reaction can be seen in Stamp Paid’s response to white violence and lynchings, culminating in his discovery of a hair ribbon ripped from a black child in the river. “Before he took a step he turned to look down the road he was travelling and said, to its frozen mud and the river beyond, ‘What *are* these people? You tell me Jesus. What *are* they?’” (180). Difference, and the mystery of difference are here turned against white identity, and significantly it is the memory of this episode, and of Baby Suggs, which turns Stamp Paid back to Sethe’s home, to attempt reconciliation.

rationalism.¹⁷ The rule of law, as a historical foundation of Western society, comprises an ideological commitment to the status of reason over arbitrary choice, of the general over the particular, and the ideal over the material. By contesting the status of the individual as the subject of law, Morrison's novel advocates the practice of hermeneutics over the rule of law, the effect of which in the ideological context of western society is uncanny and unsettling (Dalliyamar 284).

Sethe's act of violence against her daughter forms the centre of the novel, a decentred centre around which the narrative circles in a motion which can neither stop nor come full circle. Sethe's reprisal of this act does not return her to a position previously held, but allows for a change of trajectory in the closing pages of the novel. I want to return to a number of the arguments made above through a reading of Sethe's act, to suggest that this act against the systems which surround her is disruptive, but precisely non-utopian. Sethe's attack on the discourses of humanity, morality and freedom to which she is subjected under slavery does not deliver Sethe, or her child, to an 'other' place where this humanity, freedom and morality can be realised, but enforces the contradictions imposed by these discourses under slavery, and under an idealised humanist morality.¹⁸ I want to examine the effects of the extreme violence of Sethe's act on its representation within the novel, and in particular the struggle to place the concept of violence in relation to Sethe's act within evaluative structures such as law and justice, ethical choice and the integrity of the body and the meaning of bodily harm.

The realisation of Sethe's act is problematised on many levels. I want to focus on one attempt to make sense of Sethe's act and its implications: Paul D's judgment of

¹⁷ Gary Peller, in "Race Consciousness," argues persuasively that the identification of racism with irrationalism in modern theories of racial integration serves the function of locating anti-racist ideologies within a colourblind distinction between the rational and irrational within which the individual comes to be representative of a universal norm. "This universalism is a common theme that connects the integrationist analytical distinctions between reason and prejudice, objectivity and bias, neutrality and discrimination, and integration and segregation. Each dichotomy envisions a realm of impersonality, understood as the transcendence of subjective bias and contrasted with an image of a realm of distortion where particularity and stereotype reign" (74). As a result of this identification of the subject of racism under a condition of universal individualism, Baby Suggs' attempt to associate racism with a racial collective becomes both illegal and irrational.

¹⁸ Terry Otten's *Crimes of Innocence* makes an excellent case for the paradoxes of guilt and innocence in Morrison's work, in particular in response to critics such as Stanley Crouch who condemned Morrison, particularly in *Beloved*, for the representation of a generalised black criminality.

Sethe, from his refusal to recognise her picture in association with her crime, to his call to her to remember that she has “two feet, Sethe, not four” (B 165), a calling to account which is also a judgment. Paul D’s response to Sethe’s crime is complex, filtered through his perceptions of Sethe in the context of white power, through his knowledge that the appearance of a black face in a white newspaper cannot mean anything good, to his contextualisation of Sethe as a woman he has known in the past, and the context of his problematic assertion of his own humanity under the dehumanising effects of slavery (B 164). This process of judgment reveals the terms in which judgments are made, terms which gradually distance Paul D from Sethe, leading him to represent her as as alien as the inaccurate image of her in the newspaper: “This here new Sethe” (B 164). Paul D’s terms of judgment create an unbridgeable distance between them even before the “forest” which springs up between them when he openly questions her humanity.

In his reaction to his knowledge of Sethe’s act, Paul D sacrifices the non-judgmental gaze so desired by Denver and other characters in the novel (B 118), in favour of a discourse of moral humanity within which he weighs Sethe and finds her wanting. Once again, the process of the construction of the individual within this discourse is crucial. The “new” Sethe produced under Paul D’s judgmental gaze is not only separated from her past (his past knowledge of her) and from humanity, through her act, but also from the context of her actions. While Sethe refers her actions to the context of slavery, and the specific context of Sweet Home under the schoolteacher, Paul D calls on an abstract “worse” (B 165) against which her actions can be measured, and it is the refusal of this abstraction of morality on Sethe’s part which leads Paul D to question her humanity. In Paul D’s discourse, to be human is to partake in moral absolutes, even if these absolutes remain unspoken, and morality is located at the level of the human, therefore moral, individual.

The effect of this reading of Sethe against an abstract moral humanity, and her rejection of this, reveals the absences within this system of morality: the absence of the law which generates this notion of humanity, the absence of the social context in which legal and illegal actions take place, and the naturalisation of morality as the possession, and responsibility, of individual human actors. I would suggest that this must be read in relation to the discourse of “humanity” constructed through slavery. Throughout the

novel, Paul D strives to construct a humanity to which he has access, in opposition to the dehumanising treatment he receives both at Sweet Home and on the chain gang. "His strength had lain in knowing that schoolteacher was wrong" (B 126); his belief that he has proved "the difference between a mule and a plow" (B 164). Paul D's belief in his humanity however is shaken by his fear that he does not own the means of his own identity construction:

Garner called and announced them men - but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not? [...] Suppose Garner woke up one morning and changed his mind? Took the word away. (B 220)

The signifier 'man' is the possession of the slave-owner, and Paul D struggles to justify his own manhood outside this other-owned definition. This struggle takes on a specifically gendered quality in his relationship with Sethe, in particular in his interaction with Beloved, who overcomes his rational control over desire and his ability to maintain distinctions between 'inside' and 'outside' (B 116-7), and in his desire to start a family with Sethe, to establish his identity through his position within patriarchy (Pérez-Torres 700). Throughout the novel, Paul D seeks to define his own humanity as a rejection of slavery's racist claims, but this leads him to adopt a transcendental humanism which necessitates his rejection of Sethe. Her position between these discourses brings about a critique of each.

When Paul D reads Sethe against the ideal of the moral individual, he performs upon Sethe the modern function of the law in identifying lawbreaking not as the contravention of a rule enforced by power, but the contravention of a moral rule which emerges from the humanity of the community: hence, as Hannah Rendt argues, the concept of a crime against humanity refers not to a crime against an individual victim, but as a crime against the identity and stability of humanity as a moral norm (Eichmann 272). Paul D does not simply protest at Sethe's crime against her daughter, but also against the vertiginous effect this has on his view of her, and his view of himself. For Paul D, Sethe's act of violence then indicates more than a single act, and implies an identity of criminality located in the person of the criminal, rather than in the discrete act of lawbreaking. Hence Sethe is ultimately tried, in Paul D's judgment, not on what she has done but what she is, a possessor of insufficient humanity. Through this process of judgment, the possibility of lawlessness has been removed from society and identified at

the level of the individual.

By reducing Sethe's act to the question of her individual humanity, and the morality that this implies, Paul D carries out his own crime against her. As Sethe strives to explain herself, Paul D diagnoses her circling as avoidance of an explanation, rather than part of the explanation itself. "He caught only parts of what she said - which was fine, because she hadn't gotten to the main part" (161). His division of her story into "the main part" and the remainder disrupts her circular narrative and the impact of form upon meaning it alludes to - her narrative cannot be contained in the form Paul D requires. This division is repeated in his relocation of her act from the context of slavery to the context of an abstract morality. As Adorno suggests:

As soon as we ask about free will by asking about each individual decision, as soon as our question detaches these decisions from their context and the individual from society, the question will yield to the fallacy of absolute, pure being-in-itself: a limited subjective experience will usurp the dignity of the most certain of things. There is something fictitious about the substrate of the alternative. The supposedly noumenal subject is transmitted within itself by that from which it is distinguished, by the context of all subjects. The transmission makes it what in its sense of freedom it does not want to be: it becomes heteronomous. Even when unfreedom is positively assumed, the conditions of unfreedom, as those of an immanently conclusive psychological causality, are sought in the isolated individual - which essentially is not isolated. (213)

The process of identifying the autonomous subject who can stand before the law is once again read as a subject whose identity is produced out of the discourses under which it is identified. The logic of identity, which produces the individual subject who can become the object of the law, actually produces a subject whose autonomy stands at odds with its relation to the law of the subject under which it is produced: the self-constituting subject necessary to the law becomes, in its production under the logic of identity which is both of it and outside it, an impossible subject. Freedom and unfreedom, which stand in relation to our subjection under the law, are therefore not conditions produced by the subject and cannot be identified or examined through an examination of the subject. Yet Paul D subjects Sethe to precisely this examination.

While the law places responsibility for criminality in the hands of the individual, it retains responsibility for dispensing justice, and the rule of law could be defined as the replacement of individual ends which could be achieved through individual violence with legal goals which can only be achieved by legal means. "From this maxim it follows that law sees violence in the hands of individuals as a danger undermining the legal

system” (Benjamin Selected 238). Benjamin argues that the law confines the use of violence to the protection of its own authority through distinctions between the legal and the violent, a process which sanctifies lawpreserving violence as the legal, and personalises the violence of the individual (241), and it is this lawpreserving violence which operates within the judicial enquiry or examination. The judicial enquiry offers the possibility of opposing truth to violence, through the presentation of cases before an impartial judge, yet the terms of impartiality and the question of presentation remain problematic. By judging Sethe as an individual, and as responsible for her individual choice, the law invoked by Paul D can only register one form of violence: Sethe’s individual act of violence against her child. Yet the context in which this takes place, a context insisted on by Sethe and others, is the context of slavery. As suggested above, the threat of violence within slavery is not simply individual - the responsibility of individual slave-owners - but also systematic. Hence Baby Suggs’ diagnosis of the condition of white folks in relation to black experience is a direct response to Sethe’s action,¹⁹ an act elsewhere characterised as “Sethe’s rough response to the Fugitive Slave Bill” (B 171), the law which allows the schoolteacher to claim back his slaves from the free state to which they have escaped. This reading of Sethe’s act reveals it not as a individual act of lawlessness but as a political and social response to a network of oppressions and violences, in which individual choices are circumscribed. Further, the impossibility of the presentation and representation of Sethe’s act resonates throughout the novel.

The enquiry demands the presence of the case before the law, and it is a feature of the authority of the law that it can make this demand. Therefore representation occurs not because the event is already present, or waiting to be made present, but because the law seeks to make it present - the forms in which it can be made known are already circumscribed by the authority of the law. Sethe’s act is unrepresentable outside terms which will already, positively or negatively, have pronounced a judgment upon it, and in the terms Paul D produces, it will always be judged negatively. As the law limits the actions of individuals by constructing them as legal subjects, Paul D’s morality limits

¹⁹ It is also significant that Baby Suggs, who rejects Paul D’s individualistic morality, finds it impossible to either blame or acquit Sethe: “she could not approve or condemn Sethe’s rough choice. One or the other might saved her, but beaten by the claims of both, she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last” (180). Also, Sethe’s action is once again transformed into an effect of “whitefolks.”

the ends Sethe may use to achieve her aim: the protection of her children from harm.

From the lawmaking perspective Paul D represents, Sethe's final crime is not her act itself, but her assertion of the right to judge her own actions. The law of the enquiry demands that justice be aligned with an impartiality which robs the individual of their own authority, so that that authority can be retained by the law. "Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him" (B 164). What scares Paul D is Sethe's refusal to see her violence as violence, as his system of morality demands, and her claim that violence may be safety. This anarchist claim of personal responsibility is repeated in Sethe's own assessment of her act. "'It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that'" (B 165). When Paul D falls back on a morality derived from an ideal of humanity, he defers the source of his authority to judge by locating morality elsewhere. Sethe, in her claim to know "what is," contests this idea of authority residing elsewhere, in impartiality or in the possibility of making present the event.

The representation of Sethe's act in the novel resists assigning her action a purely personal moral significance, yet her act is also never *just* a political response, and the act she characterises as love is always also an act of violence. Her act is a ground of contestation between political and personal moralities and legalities, and the presence of Beloved as Sethe's act returned to her and embodied for her actualises this conflict. While Sethe's attempt to explain herself to Paul D fails, and in terms of his morality will always fail, Sethe's attempts to explain herself to Beloved, as Terry Otten suggests, form an abyssal narrative which can never end (91).²⁰ Beloved's presence prevents the relegation of the act to the past, and demands of Sethe an impossible explanation in the present.

Therefore, the representation of Sethe's act resists its reduction to the status of her individual possession, and the representation of Sethe as a discrete individual actor who is the origin of the act. Despite this, questions of effect and responsibility retain a forceful effect in the novel. Her act emerges as the contingent and uncontainable within the representative systems of moral justice and of personal responsibility, and I would argue that the novel also resists the possibility of constructing a new system of justice

²⁰ This relationship also short-circuits the logic of exchange addressed throughout the novel. Sethe's explanation can be seen as narrative without end, but also as a debt which cannot be paid.

which could justify and contain Sethe's act, a response which would involve the negation of Sethe's difference, a difference forced upon the reader as an ethical impulse within the act of reading. To found a new system of justice, or of reading, upon Sethe's act would be to continue to privilege the same over difference, to attempt to assert the recognisable and the containable over the contingent, and to adhere to an administrative system which privileges positivity over paradox. To reduce Sethe's act to an identity under the concepts of innocence or guilt would be to commit an act of violence against Sethe, or against *Beloved*. Therefore *Beloved*, through its representation of the abyssal nature of Sethe's act, confronts us with the possibility of justice not as a legislating power, but as a meeting with the other which does not seek to subject Sethe to the judgment of innocence and guilt within a system of justice which can recognise and speak of only certain types of private innocence and guilt.

One question that must be addressed is the nature of Sethe's act, not in terms of innocence and guilt, but in terms of the identity of the act itself: killing her child. In the reading above, I have suggested that the text resists the reduction of Sethe to a position of individual responsibility for her act, and that this changes the nature of the act itself in relation to morality, and the possibility of ethical choice viewed within a system of oppressions rather than within a presumption of individual freedom. As N.J Rengger argues, the possibility of making an ethical choice:

assumes that the context exists in which such choices are possible and make sense. If our social conditions are such that our habits have become, so to speak, impregnated with forms of action that we might in other contexts wish to term 'evil', then our actions will be, so to speak, routinely 'evil' inside a setting to which no real answer to the question of 'Evil' is possible. (176)

Distinguishing "evil," as the product of human actions, as Rengger does, from "Evil" as the concept of Evil in the world, is useful in defining the nature of Sethe's act. Paul D seeks to remove Sethe's act from the "social conditions" of the world to a special category of Evil for which social conditions are no longer responsible, and in which Sethe's action and her responsibility can be aligned. To mark Sethe as the source of evil provides an answer to the question of "Evil," centred on the act of killing her child. Evil, in these terms, is contained within a logic of responsibility which suggests that the source of evil in society can be located, and excluded, through the body of the lawless individual, whether through confinement, correction, or death. The deconstruction of the

responsible individual in the novel reminds us that responsibility is not universal, but, as William Connolly argues, is a “systematically ambiguous practice” (96).²¹ The multiple identity of Sethe’s act displaces the symmetry of responsibility and evil required by justice, and suggests that the call for such justice comes from other places and desires than an innate morality.

By combating the self-reassurance provided by theories of neat coordination between the social function of responsibility and the essence of human beings, one becomes alert to new dimensions of ethical concern in the relations of identity to difference. One becomes alert to the element of existential revenge lodged within idealizations of identity and responsibility. (Connolly 121)

The locus of evil in Sethe’s act is the killing of her child, a multiply represented act at the centre of the novel which informs and structures all other knowledge in the novel. This is a familiar aspect of Morrison’s work: problematic deaths, such as those of Chicken Little and Plum in *Sula*, and Dorcas in *Jazz*, present Morrison’s protagonists as caught in networks of guilt, innocence and responsibility within which the meaning of death becomes varied and various. Other deaths, such as the psychic death of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, the supernatural life after death of the convent women in *Paradise* and the epiphany / death of Milkman in *Song of Solomon* all present death in new forms, as inhabiting borderland states of consciousness, knowledge and power. These treatments of death demand a more complex reaction than an equation of death with evil and of life with affirmation. In *Beloved*, one aspect of the complexity of the treatment of death is once again the condition of slavery within the novel, and as Paul Gilroy suggests, the dialectic of master and slave must impact upon the dialectic of life and death (219). The condition of slavery can also be seen as a literalisation of the murderous nature of racism, and one feature of Morrison’s work which is equally, if not more striking, than the repetition of acts of violence carried out by her protagonists, is the inclusion of catalogues of nameless, faceless victims of white racism in American history, a history which indicates a rage against the other which is more complex and more problematic than anything that can be contained by a concept of the evil individual. This perhaps suggests that a society which does not cherish the lives of its black citizens cannot stand

²¹ Responsibility continues as a practice despite this ambiguity: “Modern life cannot dispense with responsibility, but life exceeds, resists, and overflows the mould of responsibility imposed upon it. Responsibility is both indispensable to life and an artificial construct imposed upon beings never exhausted by its attractions. Responsibility is an indispensable ambiguity, a real fabrication, a constructed reality” (Connolly 115).

in judgment over Sethe when this judgment obscures the possibility of recognising other forms of evil. The basis on which Sethe's act is most easily condemned is that she deprives her daughter of an absolute right to life. Yet this right to life is not respected within the system of slavery, and Sethe's lack of recognition of her daughter as an individual emerges from knowledge of a system which does not recognise her daughter's humanity, and which claims not only a right over her daughter's life, but also her death. This context disrupts the moral individualism that justice requires.²² At this point, Sethe participates in the logic of slavery, by reclaiming power over death and the other from slavery, yet the liminal state of her daughter's identity produced by this - as individual and property - maintains the paradoxical nature of Sethe's act.²³

In the context of this catalogue of violence, Sethe's act cannot simply be identified as an act of murder - the imposition of death upon her daughter - but contains multiple identities within multiple discourses: as an act of murder, of self-harm, of revenge or sabotage, of reclamation, or even of heroism and self-sacrifice. This identification of Sethe's act does not only depend upon the discourse under which it is viewed, but is also bound up in the liminal identity of her daughter, an identity which remains paradoxical through its location within the discourses of slavery, liberal humanism, and the mother - daughter relationship. However, the problem of accounting for Sethe's act remains at issue if we are to continue to ethically distinguish one violent act from another.²⁴

In contrast to the moral individualism at work in Paul D's condemnation of

²² "When the background presupposed by the serene phenomenology of freedom and mortality is destabilized, each of its elements becomes disrupted. The experience of freedom is drained from the exercise of choice; the experience of choice is wrenched from the requirement to convert life into a project; the assurance of temporal stability is withdrawn from the time covered by a life project.[...] The anticipation of death, which was to foster individuality and connectedness, becomes prized loose from the stable context in which these consolations are assured" (Connolly 27). Here Connolly is describing the disruption of freedom and mortality in late modernity, which disrupts the stable connections between the subject and the life project. I would suggest that slavery, historically and in the context of Morrison's novel, performs a similar act of disruption.

²³ This connection of a self-chosen death with resistance and life can also be seen in Sixo's death - the announcement of his child at the same time as his death is an act of defiance which proclaims his right to continuity through his child, and the right to possess this himself - rather than an increase in the property of the schoolteacher.

²⁴ James Phelan, in "Sethe's Choice: 'Beloved' and the Ethics of Reading," suggests that Sethe's account of her action must be seen as one account among others, and as of no greater ethical significance. In particular, he suggests that her account displaces the horror found in the descriptions of others. While this is true, I would argue that it is necessary to explore in greater detail the conditions of speaking which produce the various accounts of her actions.

Sethe, characters throughout the novel express a desire for a communion which exceeds the limits of the mediated communication between subjects, and self-communion which escapes the judgmental external gaze. Denver's desire is for a gaze which can observe her without objectifying her:

It was lovely. Not to be stared at, not seen, but being pulled into view by the interested, uncritical eyes of the other. [...] She floated near but outside her own body, feeling vague and intense at the same time. Needing nothing. Being what there was. (B 118)

Yet this feeling of adequacy possessed by Denver is linked to a lack on the part of Beloved, her observer, and the gaze which holds her is not a place of safety. Like the woods to which the women escape to be unobserved, and the interior of 124, physical and emotional sites of retreat signal the desire for communion with the other, and the other-as-the-self, but also the fragility and failure of communion which is also a site of negotiation and competition, signalled in the "palm held out for a penny" (B 118) that Denver recognises in Beloved.

Denver identifies the non-judgmental gaze with an unspeakable sense of presence and adequation, "Being what was there." This idea of an unspeakable presence can also be located in the insistence on a theory of quantification throughout the novel. "'Everything depends upon knowing how much.' [...] 'Good is knowing when to stop'" (B 87). In the context of slavery, both material possessions and emotions must be rationed - it is Baby Suggs' excessive feast which symbolically preceedes the fatal meeting between Sethe and the white slavecatchers, and Sethe herself is seen as someone who cannot accept the necessity of this rationing, and the need for a discrete identity which accompanies it. She is someone who "didn't know where the world stopped and she began," and her excessive love is blamed, by some around her at least, for her violence against her child (B 152, 162, 164). The quantification of love, and of action, acts as an economy of restriction whose borders cannot be securely or rationally established, but which function as boundaries of security for those held under slavery. Describing his time on the chain-gang in Georgia, Paul D locates this quality in Hi Man, who voluntarily regulates their day, and whose actions lead their eventual escape. Hi Man's call signals the beginning of the day, and:

It was never clear to Paul D how he knew when to shout that mercy. They called him Hi Man and Paul D thought at first the guards told him when to give the signal that let the prisoners rise off their knees and dance two-step to the music of hand-forged iron. Later he doubted it.

He believed to this day that the 'Hiiii!' at dawn and the 'Hoooo!' when evening came were the responsibility Hi Man assumed because he alone knew what was enough, what was too much, when things were over, when the time had come. (B 108)

Yet this skill is double-edged: while Hi Man can act as leader in "the Delivery" (B 110) when the prisoners escape, his skill for accommodation also prevents earlier rebellion. Sethe's act of murder, by contrast, refuses the accommodation with the conditions of slavery that Hi Man makes possible, but also fulfils the self-destruction that an earlier rebellion by the prisoners would have achieved.

This theory of quantification, which is a form of judgment which is non-judicial, is not shared by the white community according to black characters. Baby Suggs' assertion of the bad luck of whitefolks concludes: "'They don't know when to stop,' she said, and returned to her bed, pulled up the quilt and left them to hold that thought forever" (B 104). Baby Suggs' diagnosis of the condition of whiteness reverses racist prescriptions which associate criminality and irrationality with black identities, yet the boundary between black and white identity under the discourse of slavery remains unstable.

"Tell me something, Stamp." Paul D's eyes were rheumy.
 "Tell me this one thing. How much is a nigger supposed to take? Tell me. How much?"
 "All he can," said Stamp Paid. "All he can."
 "Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?" (B 235)

Paul D's unanswered question identifies the unspoken context which limits the theory of quantification - slavery - and expresses the difficulty of accounting for the effects of slavery.

One of the difficulties in reading and interpreting Sethe's act is its revolutionary potential. In The Philosophy of the Limit, Drucilla Cornell suggests that acts of revolutionary violence cannot be justified in advance because a "separation of cognition and action by *time* means that no acts of violence can truly be justified at the time they take place, if by truly justified one means cognitive assurance of the rightness of the action" (168). To insert Sethe's act into a temporality in which its justice or injustice can be measured is what provokes Paul D's fear of Sethe's act as a precedent; as the establishment of a new rule of law. As a result, Paul D's use of a standard of moral humanity can be seen as an attempt to connect the law (as justice) with the theory of the quantifiable seen elsewhere in the novel. In the essay "Force of Law," Derrida makes

this connection between law and the calculable:

Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it requires us to calculate with the incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice, that is to say moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule. (16)

The nature of Sethe's act as represented in Morrison's novel demonstrates the deconstruction of the rule of law which demands that justice be calculable, and reveals that the unspeakable element of calculation results in the need to violently impose an identity - of criminality, or inhumanity - upon the subjects of the law. The multiple representations of Sethe's crime complicate her identity before the law and reveals the rule of law as a violent imposition which cannot lead to justice being done to Sethe.

Therefore, the insistence upon the context of slavery in the representation of Sethe's violent act through the construction of discourses of law in the novel puts into question the possibility of justice, and the nature of Sethe's act as just or unjust remains in question. A crucial element of this is the fact that Sethe's action is not represented as revolutionary to the extent that it founds a new order: though the criminality of Sethe's act may be put into question, through a questioning of the grounds on which criminality, violence and responsibility are distributed, Sethe's act does not establish a precedent, and as such cannot be made to conform to Kant's Categorical Imperative. The non-dissemination of Sethe's act occurs through the repetition of her violence, in her failed attack on Edwin Bodwin. This episode has been identified as a moment of resolution for Sethe by critics such as Mae Henderson (80), yet I would argue that resolution remains in suspension, particular in the ambiguous ending of the novel. Rather, Sethe's repetition of her act is a repetition with difference which cannot solve the problem of her original violence but which can allow Sethe to escape from the paradox of history which produces her act as indeterminable (its meaning cannot be known at the time of her action) and overdetermined (in the judgments of others). Under linear temporality, Sethe has the ability to do only one thing, once, in a given situation, and yet cannot securely know the outcome of her actions, even though her actions will have effects beyond that place and time. By the repetition of her act, Sethe is allowed to overcome the paradox of history which separates her from her action in the past. Therefore, the two actions must be read together; each is still an act of violence, and each still contains the possibility of self-destruction, yet Sethe's reinterpretation of her action turns this violence outward

onto the white community rather than against her child. The implications of this insistence upon reading Sethe's second act as a reinterpretation of the first reinforces the violent nature of her attack upon Bodwin, as representative of the white community, and insists that the justice of *this* attack, like that of her attack upon her child, remains profoundly in question. As a result, and although the novel ends with the resolution of Sethe's relationship with the black community, the nature of black / white relations at the close of the novel remains strikingly unresolved.

The ambivalent closure of the novel, I would suggest, speaks profoundly of this lack of resolution, and *Beloved's* ghostly presence indicates not only the trace of the undecidable nature of Sethe's original act, but also the potential violence of its repetition. By highlighting the question of how *Beloved's* story is to be 'passed on,' the representation of the possibilities of justice for those held under slavery in the novel resonate with the conditions of justice in contemporary American life. As Terry Otten suggests, "Sethe's emancipation cannot be legislated" (94), and in part this is because no act of legislation can be an act of neutral judgment or transformation in a society in which the rule of law contains within it a history of differential racial identities. The complexity of this history is alluded to in the novel in a pivotal passage:

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift, unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (B 198-9)

The imagined jungles of Africa and the jungles of white racism and fear cannot be separated, identities are tangled and neither black nor white escapes harm in the process of domination by white on black. Neither identity can be secured or stabilised in separation from the other, but, as Sethe's redirected violence suggests, recognition of the interdependence of identity does little to create a space of safety when identity continues to be constructed under a rule of law which makes impossible the representation of harm

done during slavery. Further, the co-implication of black and white identities in the construction of fear and violence alluded to in the passage above (though black and white participants clearly do not play equal parts) and the insistence on the significance of the context of slavery in Sethe's act makes impossible the separation of intraracial violence from interracial violence. Therefore, as a result of the novel's deconstruction of the discourses of identity, morality and judgment, it is not only the possibility of justice being done to Sethe which hangs in the balance, but also the possibility of non-violent black / white relations.

Jazz: narrative politics *en Abyme*

The questions of identity and justice which I have suggested are crucial to a reading of Beloved and an understanding of the representation of violence in that novel have frequently been raised in relation to Morrison's next novel, Jazz. Though structured through a complex temporal network, the present of the novel takes place in 1926 and is set in the context of the mass migration of African Americans from the rural south to northern urban centres which occurred in this period. While the immediate historical experience of slavery and its aftermath in the segregated south are relegated to the characters' pasts, the legacy of this history continues to inform the present circumstances of these characters while the modern urban setting of the novel creates the possibility of new narratives of black identity.

In an early review in Time magazine, Paul Gray sets out what he believes to be a central problem of the novel.

[F]or all its local eloquence, *Jazz* never convincingly accounts for the horror that Joe and Violet feel compelled to wreak. That they have suffered - from white racism, poverty - is made abundantly clear. Their individual motives for lashing out as they do are not. Asked directly why he shot Dorcas, Joe says, "Scared. Didn't know how to love anybody." Asked why she tried to carve up a dead girl's face, Violet answers, "I don't know." Great fiction explains the inexplicable. By that standard, *Jazz* measures up as very good. (70)

In this reductive reading of the novel, Gray demonstrates a standard of evaluation not only of "great fiction" but also of the individual in relation to violence, or "horror," which I would suggest Morrison's novel explicitly sets out to refute. The suggestion that Joe and Violet's motivations could be made known in such a way absolutely denies the complexity with which the novel questions the extent to which the individual can be known through their actions and the decisive impact of the narrative structures through which such knowledge is constructed. However, I do not believe that this implies, as Jan Furman suggests, that "crime and punishment do not concern Morrison [...] Morrison does not brand Joe Trace as an immoral man. He and Violet are good people whose circumstances shape their bizarre behaviour" (86). While it is clear that Joe and

Violet's actions must be understood in the contexts in which they are performed, I would argue that Morrison remains deeply concerned with the idea of crime and the extent to which the crimes represented in her novel, through the manner of their representation, explode the notion that a binary equivalence of crime and punishment can be constructed which will be adequate to the meaning of the violent act itself. As in Beloved, Morrison dislocates violent crime for the structure of individual morality organised by the notion of the criminal or law-abiding individual, and relocates violence in its political, social and historical context. However, the individual is not then replaced by the concept of a general condition, and once again the juxtaposition of the experience of the individual and broader political contexts is represented as a relationship of tension rather than resolution. In reading Jazz, I will focus attention on the production of multiple narrative strategies in the novel which exist in relationships of tension and conflict and which cannot be reduced to the condition of stable identity. These narrative strategies come to provide a response to the question of violence which does not seek to locate the meaning of violent acts, or the possibility of a turn away from violence, in the reduction of the individual to their act or the binary equivalence of crime and punishment.

In Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle, Gurleen Grewal finds a call to interpretation in the "alarming facts" (118) of the opening of Jazz. Grewal focuses on the facts of Dorcas' case in this reading, yet at this point in the novel the "eighteen-year-old girl" (J 3), the "dead girl (J 4), remains nameless. The one who is named is Violet, named unambiguously by the narrator in the opening, both by her name and by the fact that she is a woman who is known: "Sth, I know that woman" (J 3). Yet this knowledge is retrospective, coming after the events the opening of the novel describes. At the time of Violet's attack on Dorcas' corpse, Violet's identity is circumstantial. In the wake of the attack, the trail leading to Violet's house and to her name has been obliterated, and it requires the intervention of the spectators at the funeral to make Violet's act, and her identity, add up. "But like me," says the narrator, "they knew who she was, who she had to be, because they knew that her husband, Joe Trace, was the one who shot the girl" (J 4). Violet's name is found at the end of a causal string which leads to her identification, and which substitutes for the missing trail left by her own footprints, covered by a shifting landscape of drifting snow. This causal string connects

her act of violence to its end, but not to its beginnings in Violet's own past. This end-directed reading performed by the narrator, at this point claiming the position of community representative, leads to Violet's exclusion from the community of respectable black life in the city, in the form of the Salem Women's Club. The club claims to withdraw only financial help from Violet, but this withdrawal is also imaginative and discursive, despite the promise of "prayer" (J 4). "The Club mobilized itself to come to the burnt-out family's aid and left Violet to figure out on her own what the matter was and how to fix it" (J 4). The community knowledge to which Violet is initially subjected is a trail which leads the community away from, rather than towards, her possible meanings.

The forces of the community at this point, and the initially rational voice of the narrator presented immediately as an insider and as a guide to the text, act not only in ignorance (or denial) of Violet's missing trail, but also in denial of its absence. Hence the call to interpretation initiated by the opening of the novel calls attention not only to "alarming facts" which must be explained, but also to the absence of knowledge, of the trail, revealed by the text. In this opening then, the text presents the formal elements of the detective novel while deconstructing the rational exegetical structure of the genre. Through this double movement, the text not only presents its narrative mystery as the stories of Violet, Joe and "the dead girl," but presents the narrative itself as mystery.

Franco Moretti identifies detective fiction as the apotheosis of instrumental rationalism: "this culture knows, orders, and defines all the significant data of individual existence as part of social existence. Every story reiterates Bentham's Panopticon ideal: the model prison that signifies the metamorphosis of liberalism into total scrutability" (143). The position of authority adopted by the narrator re-envision the path leading from the funeral to Violet's home so that its physical absence becomes an imagined presence, while the knowledge of the community which reconstructs this path obliterates Violet's individuality beyond her identity as Joe's wife. At the same time, the opening of *Jazz* can be read as an inversion of the structure of the detective novel: the names of the guilty are supplied at the opening of the text and as a result the knowledge of innocence and guilt which the detective genre privileges as significant and around which the detective narrative is organised is revealed to be insufficient to account for the events portrayed in the opening of the novel, or the identity of the actors introduced there.

Beyond the simplicity of innocence and guilt, the motives of these actors remain irredeemably multiple, and speak to the multiplicity, rather than scrutability, of the individual. Through this deconstruction of the explanatory form of the crime genre, Morrison directs the function of the crime novel away from the pursuit of the individual actor.

Reading the crime genre in the context of modernism, Walter Benjamin suggests that “[t]he original social content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individual’s traces in the big-city-crowd” (Baudelaire 43). In the context of modernism, Benjamin suggests, the function of the detective story is to combat fears of the obliteration of the individual under the forces of modernism identified with the “big-city-crowd,” through the retracing of the individual’s presence and the reinscription of the individual face in the crowd. While Benjamin regards the impulse of modernism as a horror at the loss of the identity of the individual, Violet as the subject of the detective/narrator is fatally *known*; and the retracing of her steps ultimately leads not to her individual identity, but to her misidentification as “Violent.” “The woman who ruined the service, changed the whole point and meaning of it and was practically all anybody talked about when they talked about Dorcas’ death and in the process had changed the woman’s name. Violent they called her now” (J 75). Violet’s identity, for the collective, is subsumed under the identification of her act, her attack on Dorcas, yet her ability to embody this identity is only ever partial. As “Violent,” Violet’s relationship with the world around her is distorted by the presence of gaps and “cracks” in the continuity of reality (J 22-23) and her relationship with her body is marked by absences; the hips she tries to grow (J 93, 114, 197), the imagined presence of the daughter she does not have (J 108-9) and the ghostly presence of other identities - the Violet who carries out the attack at the funeral and who only intermittently connects Violet with her past (J 90-96, 114) and the light-skinned presence of images of Dorcas and of Golden Gray. The disruption of continuity, of the logic of cause and effect in the construction of Violet’s identity in the city at once makes her identity available to those who see her only as “Violent” and resists the scrutability required for the stable identification of her criminality.

Benjamin suggests that the detective novel marks a response to the “big-city-crowd” and the loss of identity that this implies through an attempt to reinscribe the

totality of the individual proposed under the Enlightenment; as a result, the function of the structure of the detective novel is reactionary and conservative. In opposition to this, Fredric Jameson identifies the “conspiratorial text” as a product of late twentieth century, late-capitalist society. “[T]he ‘conspiratorial text’ [...] whatever other messages it emits or implies, may also be taken to constitute an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century whose abominations are heightened by their concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality” (*Geopolitics* 3). Jameson sees the conspiratorial text as a response to the alienation felt in the face of late-capitalist social structures which displace the individual from proximity to structures of power, structures and relationships which the conspiratorial text attempts to reimagine. However, unlike the detective novel, this reimagining takes place at the level of the social rather than the individual: “it is society as a whole that is the mystery to be solved” (39). The utopian totality sought by the conspiratorial text is not the unity of the enlightenment individual, but rather an understanding of the social which is always already mediated through ideology and the symbolic.

In Morrison’s novel, those officially empowered to investigate are immediately discounted: “the dead girl’s aunt didn’t want to throw money to helpless lawyers or laughing cops when she knew the expense wouldn’t improve anything” (J 4); but energy is expended throughout the text in attempts to address Violet’s problem of “what the matter was and how to fix it” (J 4). The narrator repeatedly describes her activities as an active investigation, rather than the recording of observations: “I watch everything and everyone and try to figure out their plans, their reasonings, long before they do. You have to understand what it’s like, taking on a big city: I’m exposed to all sorts of ignorance and criminality” (J 8). For Malvonne, information about her neighbours, the object of her interest, comes from stolen letters which must not only be read but also acted upon (J 41-4), while Alice constructs her knowledge of the city from newspapers which she reads and rereads, searching for the subtext of violence beneath the stories, and within headlines which are fractured by her reading: “Women and girls victim of. Woman commits suicide. White attackers indicted. Five women caught. Woman says man beat. In jealous rage man” (J 74). When Alice and Violet come together, their meeting is framed by a series of questions “why” J (81) which are never

fully answered. Throughout the novel, then, characters search for the disclosure of meaning in social narratives and attempt to construct meaning through the fragments of information which come into their possession, a structure reflected in the novel itself as a collection of personal histories brought together by the text.

As Benjamin suggests above, crime writing exists primarily as an urban form, wherein “the opaque complexity of modern city life is represented by crime” (R. Williams, Country 10). The figure of the city is evoked in Jazz as a landscape²⁵ against which the narrator seeks to place, order and explicate events, and the spatial structures of the city are repeatedly endowed with an explanatory social power by the narrating voice. “Nobody says it’s pretty here; nobody says it’s easy either. What it is is decisive, and if you pay attention to the street plans, all laid out, the City can’t hurt you. [...]. Do what you please in the City, it is there to back and frame you no matter what you do” (J 8-9). The city contextualises its inhabitants, setting them within scenes which gain their meaning through surface detail and contrast rather than depth (McKee, Producing 174-5). Hence while the crime genre seeks to make explicable the complexity of the city through the crime narrative, Morrison’s city is figured by the narrator as a source of order in itself, but only through its production as narrative: narrative functions in this novel as “map, not territory” (Jones 492) and crucially as a mapping of a territory which does not exist beyond the narrative.

The crime genre opposes the city with the presence of authority, in the form of the forces of law and order, but in Morrison’s novel, these forces comprise a foundational absence in the city of Jazz where an intervention by the police is not an option (J 4, 74). The lawful authority of the modernist city crime novel is replaced in Jazz by the questionable authority of the narrator. The city is presented as having the quality Roland Barthes describes as “scriptible” (S/Z 3), as site / sight of oppositional interpretations, and the scriptible city represented by the narrator becomes both a site of authority (through the possibility of the production of knowledge which she founds upon her reading of the city) and a destabilisation of authority through the excessive potential for meaning that the scriptible city possesses.

²⁵ The use of “landscape here draws on Barbara Bender’s definition: “[t]he landscape is never inert, people engage with it, rework it, appropriate and contest it. It is a part of the way in which identities are created and disputed, whether as individual, group or nation state [...] landscapes are thus polysemic, and not so much artifact as in process of construction and reconstruction” (Bender 3).

Under the authority of the narrating voice, the city and its inhabitants exist in an abyssal relationship, where the city and the self are linked by a particular act of mutual construction. The narrator says of the city; “It makes you wonderful just to see it” (J 11). Wonder is provoked not only by sight of the city, but also by the possibility of an environment responsive to the needs of black Americans, and this is not only a depiction of a historically felt wonder, but also a particular act of narration. The wonder of the city inhabits the identity of the observer as a state of being as well as an emotional reaction, the spectator becomes simultaneously “wonderful” and “full of wonder”. This is a state of being whose origin appears to be simultaneously the gaze of the spectator and the object of the gaze, locked in a relationship of “wonder” which precludes the designation of an originating act of agency. Yet the status of the city, as a possessor of this apparently mutual gaze is problematic to that extent that the city, as subject, is a creation of the narrative voice - the narrator says at the end that she believed that only her view counted, and that by looking at the city - which cannot look back - the narrator missed the people, and the fact that they can and have looked back at him/her²⁶ (J 220). Revealingly, the narrator also suggests that she/he is unable to tell the difference between city statues and the faces of real people (J 7). The city is an object under the gaze of a narrating voice which repeatedly denies its power as spectator/narrator, transposing this power onto the city through the investment of the city with intention, or multiple intentions: “the streets will confuse you, teach you, or break your head” (J 72). Through this investment in the intention of the city as living landscape, the narrative finds a secondary object in the forms of the city’s inhabitants, city dwellers for whom the city acts not only as backdrop, but as a transformative medium.²⁷ The city reveals itself as a performance for the spectating narrator whose scopophilic pleasure in the spectacle of the city threatens to become fetishistic in the sense described by Laura Mulvey (21), under which the city is idealised, even overvalued, to the point at which the image of the city becomes static, atemporal, and no longer engaged with the actions of

²⁶ For a discussion of the gender of the narrator in *Jazz* see Cannon 246 n.4.

²⁷ “The woman who churned a man’s blood as she leaned alone on a fence by a country road might not expect even to catch his eye in the City. But if she is clipping quickly down the big-city street in heels, swinging her purse, or sitting on a stoop with a cool beer in her hand, dangling her shoe from the toes of her foot, the man, reacting to her posture, to soft skin on stone, is captured. And he’d think it was the woman he wanted, and not some combination of curved stone, and a swinging, high-heeled show moving in and out of sunlight. He would know right away the deception, the trick of shapes and light and movement, but it wouldn’t matter at all because the deception was part of it too” (J 34).

its inhabitants, whose meanings under the gaze of the narrator are replaced by the city's apparent explanatory power.²⁸ The narrator does not look at, but looks through the city and it is interesting to contrast the responsiveness of the city felt by the narrator to the description of Violet's living room: "Everything put where a person would like to have it, or would use or need it" (13), in contrast to the demands of "*Modern Homemaker*" or what "looks nice" but is not useful (J 12). The home of Violet, the liminal figure of the community, is shaped to the demands of the body and mind, rather than the demands of the gaze, or the room's to-be-looked-at-ness.²⁹

The fetishising gaze of the narrator not only constructs the city as a responsive environment where form takes on meaning, but also attempts to repress potential alternative meanings evoked by the metaphoricity or scriptible nature of the city. Talking of the spectacular rural skies the city dwellers have left behind, the narrator offers instead the "unbelievable" skies the city can provide.

But there is nothing to beat what the City can make of a night sky. It can empty itself of surface, and more like the ocean than the ocean itself, go deep, starless. Close up on the tops of buildings, near, nearer than the cap you are wearing, such a city sky presses and retreats, presses and retreats, making me think of the free but illegal love of sweethearts before they are discovered. Looking at it, this night sky booming over a glittering city, it's possible for me to avoid dreaming of what I know is in the ocean, and the bays and tributaries it feeds: the two-seat planes, nose down in the muck, pilot and passenger staring at schools of passing bluefish: money, soaked and salty in canvas bags, or waving their edges gently from metal bands made to hold them forever. They are down there, along with yellow flowers that eat water beetles and eggs floating away from thrashing fins; along with the children who made a mistake in the parents they chose; along with slabs of Carrara pried from unfashionable buildings. (J 35)

The night sky of the city has already replaced the stars of the rural sky with "thrilling, wasteful street lamps" (J 34), and the image of the sky as "like the ocean," swelling and falling in waves and reminiscent of sexual rhythms, enacts a triple displacement

²⁸ It is also interesting to note that images of the city are repeatedly reproduced in cinematic language and forms, producing framed shots, focusing to produce contrasts between objects, and montages. The use of the phrase "Close up" in the quote below can also be read ambiguously; as a spatial description, or as a cinematic instruction to the reader / viewer.

²⁹ One of the qualities which designates Violet in the city is her moments of public display, when she makes a spectacle of herself and for which she is marked out as an outsider. In the city, where public display is repeatedly marked as both illicit and commodified, Violet's public displays are unreadable and therefore dismissed as a sign of irrationality. Her public displays are the indication of an inward meaning which cannot be made to conform with the laws of exteriority that the representation of the city demands.

through a chain of images from the sky to the ocean to the life of “free and illegal love” in the city beneath. Again, causal relations become obscure in this narrative, with the “it” of the second sentence potentially applying to both the city or the sky, producing the hybrid “citysky” which creates this illusion. The narrating voice brings this illusory nature to the surface, or rather indicates the surface nature of this illusory depth, through the turn to the “true” depths of the ocean as a place of loss, destruction and waste. This knowledge of the “true” content of the ocean, the image upon which this exposition is based, is staged as a non-event, something avoided, even in dream. Like the retracing of Violet’s never-seen trail, the narrator’s literary dream of the city then is a dream of repression as well as of the explanatory power of the image, multiplied through metalepsis from the image of the beneath of the ocean to the metaphor of the city itself.

The multiplicity and noncongruity of the potentiality of meaning of the city is evoked and repressed in the representations of the narrator. This process of evocation and repression can also be seen in the complex historicity of the city in the novel, which is characterised by a tension between the simultaneity suggested by the narrator’s presentation of the city as “the new” and the historical depth suggested by allusions to the historical context of the novel and the processes of construction and reconstruction at work in the narration of the histories of individual characters. To the narrator, the city is a space of the present, divided imaginatively from the past that those migrating to the city seek to escape.

At last, at last, everything’s ahead. The smart one’s say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree: Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff. The way everyone was then and there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything’s ahead at last. (J 7)

The narrator finds in the migrants she represents an experience of the city which not only inaugurates a new life and a new self, but an erasure of the old. “There, in a city, they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves” (J 33). “[T]hey feel more like themselves, more like the people they always believed they were” (J 35). “When they fall in love with a city, it is forever, and it is like forever. As though there never was a time when they didn’t love it” (J 33). In the narrator’s complex narrative, the city becomes a past as well as a future, and is posited as fantasy outside the structure

of 'history' which questions the fantasy of simultaneity suggested by the city.³⁰

However this denial of the past beyond the city is an erasure in the Derridean sense (*Of Grammatology* 18-26); throughout the narrator's evocation of the new, the old from which this new time seeks to divide itself is ever present even in its proclaimed absence, and the narrative which the narrator claims to recount - the narrative of Joe and Violet and the juxtaposition of their present in the city with their past - is itself a denial of the structure of the historical break the narrator finds in the image of the city.

If, as in Barthes' contention, "the city, essentially and semantically, is our meeting with *the other*" (*Semiology* 96), the other in this cityscape is clearly also the self, and the encounter with "the novel, the strange and the surprising" (I.Young 239) which characterises an eroticised difference within the city contains for Morrison's citydwellers an element of recognition, in the experience of "moving down the street among hundreds of others who moved the same way they did, and who, when they spoke, regardless of the accent, treat language like the same intricate, malleable toy designed for their play" (J 32-3). The other encountered in the city by Morrison's migrants is not absolutely other, but a particular and racially specified other who locates Morrison's city historically and socially. This acts against the dream of "social and spatial inexhaustibility" (I.Young 240) which characterises the cosmopolitan, or postmodern city. Morrison's city, despite the exoticisation of its inhabitants and the sense of the new which marks the city as modern (J 7), absolutely resists its romanticisation as universally available. As Ralph Willet notes, "to regard the city as unreadable, an impenetrable blur, is to ignore the distinctions of gender, class, race and economic status" (2), and the narrator's totalising accounts of the city are repeatedly undercut. The fallibility of the narrator is indicated by the irony of her claim that she is "indestructible - like the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be

³⁰ The relationship between the narrator's account of the city and representations of the past outside the city can be usefully illuminated by Joan Scott's description of the structure of fantasy, or the "fantasy echo" of history. Scott suggests that the imaginative reconstruction of history always depends upon the context in which this history is located, and that the relationship between the historical account and the context of representation is a relationship between "imagined repetitions *and* repetitions of imagined resemblances. The echo is a fantasy, the fantasy an echo: the two are inextricably intertwined" (287, original emphasis). This has implications for the representation of the city and of the past in the country; in particular I would suggest that this historical structure of representation, seen particularly clearly in the narrator's interventions into the representation of the past, and the intrusion of images of the past into the present, refutes the argument that the country in the novel represents a source of authentic culture versus the cultural dislocation of the city - see for example Barnes.

another one" (J 7). The structure of irony, of presence through absence or contradiction, can also be seen in the parenthetical asides which give the lie to the narrator's claim that the city is a source of plenitude: "everything you want is right where you are: the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the postbox (but no high schools), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks)" (J 10). The absences in this list of properties can only be parenthetically marked as absences because they give the lie to the narrator's claim that "the City" provides all that its inhabitants could want, because the unmarked division in this case is one of race. The "City" of the novel is haunted by the presence of a city of white Americans in which the inhabitants of "the City" can travel only as visitors, or trespassers. Though unnamed, the novel appears to be set in New York, yet "the City" claimed by the narrator has an ambivalent identity as the city as such, and seems to refer to Harlem, the historical site of the renaissance in black arts and culture in the early twentieth century. By erasing the name Harlem, the narrator is able to disguise the lack indicated by the name through the claim for totality made by renaming a part of the whole as the whole itself. The narrator constructs a cognitive map of the territory of the City, within which racial boundaries appear as ghostly images, echoing the continuation of segregation from the legal spatial division of the south to the social, economic and class segregation of the north signified by the train journey Joe and Violet take which crosses the north / south boundary (J 31). Therefore, while the narrator makes an important claim for the radical possibilities of the black city, the city as a new space is not immediately adequate to this political need, and is not proof against the possibility of violence which occurs there or the remaking of its inhabitants as "Violent."

The narrative of Violet's violence therefore is represented through a narrative of the city which posits the narrative opportunities of the scriptible city landscape as both a potential site of freedom and a new form of repression. I wish to turn now to the narration of the major event of violence in the novel, Joe's murder of Dorcas, to examine its representation in the light of the narrative complexity of the novel to suggest that this narrative insists upon a reflexive reading of the concept of violence and criminality and the historical representation of black modernity which constructs the nature of Dorcas' death and the identities of those involved in her death as undecidable. In particular, I want to examine the modes and discourses of identity construction through which

Dorcas, as victim and as potential accomplice in her own death, is represented.

In a 1985 interview with Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison discusses her interest in two stories which she would come to use as sources for her work. One is the story of Margaret Garner, at that time in the process of development in the novel Beloved. The other is a story drawn from The Harlem Book of the Dead, the story of a young girl who died at a party, but refused to tell what happened to her. In the interview, Morrison explains that the striking feature of these stories, for her, was that "A woman loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself" (Morrison and Naylor 584). Later she goes on to explain that these stories influenced her development of the figure of "Beloved," both in the novel of the same name and in a later work, set in "the twenties where it switches to this other girl" (585); this later work is Jazz. Here Morrison appears to confirm that Dorcas takes over the role of "the Beloved," a confirmation which has been echoed in critical work on the novel (Jones). However, a closer examination of Morrison's source stories reveals an interesting twist: in Beloved it is Sethe who plays the role of Margaret Garner, whose love is located outside herself, and the object of whose love is Beloved, her daughter. In the Harlem story, however, it is the dead young girl whose love, and refusal to tell on her love that attracts Morrison's attention, and which seems to suggest that it is the object of her love, rather than the girl herself, who might be conceived as the "Beloved." The object of this love, in the case of Jazz, is Joe. The novel obviously complicates this schematic reading, through the ways in which Dorcas does become an object of love for Joe and for Violet. Further, the idea of the "Beloved" in Morrison's account is explicitly gendered: it is the figure of the woman loving beyond herself which instigates this creation, and the figure of Beloved is repeatedly imagined as female, as "the twin self to whatever woman shows up throughout the work" (Morrison and Naylor 585) and as a function of a necessary self-love arrived at by many of Morrison's female characters. Therefore, despite Joe's apparent role in the Harlem story as the object of the dead girl's love, it appears that he can only partially, if at all, inhabit the role of "Beloved" in Morrison's text.

I begin this section with this digression to draw attention to the question of Joe's gender. In this account, Joe's gender marks his place in the novel even before the novel's own beginning, and I want to suggest that readings of the novel have as yet paid

too little attention to the question of Joe's gender in its specificity rather than in its difference - from the female - or as a universal condition. I want to suggest that Joe's gender marks his narrative and the narrative structures available to him, and that his attempts to narrate his life as a gendered text is crucial to a reading of his violent act against Dorcas.

As Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin suggest in A World of Difference, "the men and women of Morrison's fiction occupy an ambivalent position in relation to conventional gender models" (84). This approach to gender is perceived as a turn away from the individuality of the dominant Western model of the protagonist who develops through separation from the community, towards a reciprocal identity constructed in relation to the community (Harding and Martin 63-74). The struggle of Joe and Violet to overcome the impositions of other objects of identification outside themselves, including the layered images of Wild and Golden Gray which are mediated by the presence of Dorcas and her absent present as a picture on their mantelpiece, has been the subject of a great deal of critical attention. However, I would suggest that this theory of identification has tended to equate Violet, Joe and others in the text as figures whose characteristics can be too easily distributed as tropes shared among all rather than as specific to the individual social and imaginative matrix of each. For example, the shared fact of Joe and Dorcas' orphanhood (and Violet's near orphanhood) does not result in a shared response to orphanhood, as is sometimes suggested (Jones 482). Similarly, studies which do focus on specific issues of gender have tended to concentrate on the construction and experience of female gendered desire, viewing male subjectivity as a "by-product" (Cannon 245) of the female journey. I want to suggest that while Joe's identity conforms to the deconstruction of individuality in the novel, and the blurring of gender identity which takes place in Morrison's work (Beaulieu 57-70), this must be examined in the light of the deconstruction of a particular paradigm of masculinity, and particularly the notion of narrative as masculinity, rather than a general paradigm of selfhood. Therefore, although such categories of identity as gender may in the end represent what Philip Page calls a "metaphysical simplification" (Fusion 171) which the text ultimately resists, the narrative technologies of gender must still be examined.

In his essay "'A Music Seeking Its Words': Double-Timing and Double-Consciousness in Toni Morrison's Jazz," Richard Hardrack notes that Joe possess the

status of heir within the text, as “the descendant of the male line of double-consciousness” (455) which passes imaginatively to him from Golden Gray.

Elsewhere, Carolyn Jones finds ancestors for Joe in the classical figure of Ulysses, who undergoes “a life of constant physical movement and change that is about trying to get home” (483) and Orestes, as a son faced with a cycle of tragic violence (490). Within the text, Joe himself makes an imaginative claim to the image of the biblical Adam (J 40, 133, 135). Therefore Joe is repeatedly critically situated, and situates himself, within a line of male descent. I want to suggest that we must add the figure of Oedipus to these imagined ancestors and, using Teresa de Lauretis’ influential feminist reading of the role of the Oedipus figure in the construction of narrative in Western literature, which argues that the subject is engendered by the process of its engagement with the narrative (de Lauretis 122), I want to suggest that Joe attempts to exert authority over the narrative of his subject development through the use of a mythic Oedipal structure. Therefore Joe’s identity, and in particular his masculinity, are products of the textual construction of his life in his autobiographical narrative which posits a particular relationship of authority to the female objects of his narrative.

By drawing attention to Joe’s narrative as a mythic or founding narrative based in Western culture, I am not disputing the claims of many critics that Morrison produces characters whose multiply-located selves do not conform to the demands of individuality found in Western realist literature.³¹ Rather I want to suggest that Joe, in his autobiographical narrative within the novel produces an imagined relationship with Dorcas which is then contested from within that narrative itself. It seems important to note here that the text I am identifying as ‘Joe’s narrative’ is produced within the narrator’s text, and that the apparent excursions into the text by characters’ voices cannot be securely distinguished and held in separation from the narrator’s text. Therefore the critique of Joe’s narrative here is not a critique of a straightforwardly “male-authored” text, but rather a reading of narrative strategy in which gender appears as a “technology” which is produced in discursive competition with other narratives and other gender technologies (de Lauretis, *Technologies*).

In the essay “Desire in Narrative,” Teresa de Lauretis records the staging of the

³¹ See for example Harding and Martin: “Since her characters are reified and exploited in their relations with the dominant racial group, binary division such as those between subject and object, self and other, hero and villain, no longer hold. Morrison’s characters have to contend with multiple designations of themselves as both object and subject, self and (racial) Other, elected and damned” (34).

drama of narrative as an Oedipal drama, and the pleasure of the text as an Oedipal pleasure within the history of structuralism and semiotics (de Lauretis, *Alice* 103-57). As Oedipal drama, narrative is structured by desire as a drive to discover, uncover, and reveal, where the roles of active agents and passive objects are defined by gender.

The desire is Oedipus's, and although its object may be woman (or Truth or knowledge or power), its term of reference and address is man: man as social being and mythical subject, founder of social order and mimetic violence. (112)

The Oedipal narrative then,

in its 'making sense' of the world, [...] endlessly reconstructs it as a two-character drama in which the human person creates and recreates *himself* out of an abstract or purely symbolic other - the womb, the earth, the grave, the woman. (121)

In the Oedipal narrative, the male subject constructs his identity through an assertion of narrative authority which inscribes his identity as active subject upon the female other who becomes, through this act of inscription, a passive object.

Joe repeatedly represents himself as self-named and self-founded. "Before I met [Dorcas] I'd changed into new seven times. The first time was when I named my own self, since nobody did it for me, since nobody knew what it could or should be" (J 123). Lacking knowledge of his origins, Joe names himself with the sign of his absent parents, "Trace," and his search for Wild as his absent mother is intertwined with a denial of origins beyond the self. This is symbolised by his search for the his lost tree (J 173, 180, 182), whose "roots grew backward as though, having gone obediently into the earth and found it barren, retreating to the trunk for what was needed. Defiant and against logic its roots climbed" (182). Like the illogical self-sustaining tree, Joe attempts to locate himself as the source and origin of his genealogy, a claim to self determination which defines his narrative as logocentric (Page, "Traces" 57). This self determining genealogy is founded in the fraternal community of Victory and Hunter's Hunter, which exists outside society, in the woods, and into which Joe is initiated rather than born.

Philip Page identifies Hunter's Hunter as "the archetypal father figure" ("Traces" 58) of the novel. He is the father of Golden Gray and surrogate father to Joe, whose birth it is suggested he witnesses and whose manhood he shapes. His status as archetypal father figure is reinforced for Page by his status within the text as a "griot, a spiritual guide" (58), a status indicated by his proximity to nature and his possession of

an “earned selfhood” which is indicated by his dual names, “Hunter’s Hunter” (J 166) and “Henry Lestory” (J 148), names which for Page associate this character with the self-presence of the “arche” or origin, and a self-identity with the story, whose principal metaphor, tracking, he has perfected (“Traces” 58). However, while Hunter’s Hunter is certainly positioned as a father figure in the text, he is either an absent father, or a substitute for another absence. Further, Page reads Hunter’s Hunter as indicating the possibility of a writing which escapes the condition of *différance*, in which the doubling of “Hunter’s Hunter” confirms, rather than disseminates his identity, and in which it is possible that “Henry is the story” (58). Hunter’s Hunter, as the self-presence of writing and of identity, presents an ideal identity which can be found in his directive to Golden Gray to become self-sufficient and self-constituting: “A son ain’t what a woman say. A son is what man do” (J 172). In this specifically gendered history of identity, the linguistic transition from “son” to “man” is achieved through action which is entirely self-referential, and while this ideal suggests an important message about self-responsibility, and about the racialisation of manhood, it is an ideal which is belied by the text in which it occurs. Golden Gray must seek out his father. Joe must seek his mother. Hunter’s Hunter’s self-referential self-constituting identity survives only at the margins, rather than at the centre of the text of *Jazz* and as such more fully demonstrates Derrida’s concept of “arche-writing” than Page will perhaps allow.³² As John Llewelyn suggests, “The arche-writing or arche-trace is the non-original origin of alleged transcendental origins” (126 n.5), and within this conception of arche-writing, the “arche” is put under erasure by its relationship with writing.

The possibility that Hunter’s Hunter represents arche-writing is significant in identifying Joe’s narrative as an attempt to inscribe himself into the centre of his text as at once subject and as authority. This attempt comes into conflict with elements of the text which displace both his authority and the position of centrality he claims as a function of his textual authority. Joe’s narrative strategies attempt to control the dissemination of identity across the text which occurs when his narrative is read alongside other narratives (and this multiplicity is in direct contrast to the idea of Hunter’s Hunter as *the* story). This is not a failure of Joe’s narrative in its specificity, but a function of narrative authority which attempts to found its own meanings and

³² Page relates Hunter’s Hunter’s identity only to the prefix of the Derridean term (“Traces” 58).

knowledge within a text of contested meanings and situated knowledges.

Joe's pursuit of Wild, and pursuit of Dorcas as an object of his narrative and as a double of Wild, is a quest for substance, for presence over absence. His initial attraction to Dorcas is structured by a desire to recollect substance directly in an experience not "drained of everything but the language to say it in" (J 29). His call to Wild to identify herself repeats this desire for a presence which outstrips language:

She wouldn't have to say anything, although nobody had ever heard her say anything; it wouldn't have to be words; he didn't need words or even want them because he knew how they could lie, could heat your blood and disappear. [...]. All she had to do was give him a sign [...] to say that she knew him to be the one. (J 37)

Later even this vital content is stripped from Joe's need for Wild's sign: "'You my mother?' Yes. No. Both. Either. But not this nothing" (J 178).

Despite his stated distrust for language, Joe's narrative manipulates the circumstances of his encounter with Wild, instilling unreliability into a text concerned with the location of signs. One encounter with Wild is told twice, initially taking place in near dark, then in total darkness, moving from "he could barely see" (J 36) to "he could not see" (J 37). This minor difference is enough to possibly change the content of the encounter, from the absence of a sign to a sign that is "missed" (J 37), a difference which returns the power of interpretation to Joe and away from Wild's potential refusal to represent herself or make herself available for interpretation. Wild's crime against Joe, and against the authority of his narrative, is that she refuses to present herself as a sign to be read, positively or negatively by Joe, a refusal that leads to his dismissal of her as without meaning: "She was powerless, invisible, wastefully daft. [...] this indecent speechless lurking insanity" (J 179). This construction of Wild as monstrous and inhuman is undone by Joe's eventual entry into her burrow, and the revelation of this as a space of the domestic.³³

Wild cannot be positioned as an object within Joe's narrative because of her refusal to reveal herself as a sign to be interpreted. By contrast, Dorcas appears as an

³³ Once again, Joe's narrative is initially posited in Oedipal terms which are then overthrown or reworked by the relation of his narrative to the narratives of others. The entrance to Wild's home is repeatedly signified as a boundary, evoking the traditional act of passage which must be undertaken by the Oedipal hero; it is "the *limen*, frontier between the desert and the city, threshold to the inner recesses of the cave or maze, [which] metaphorizes the symbolic boundary between nature and culture, the limit and test imposed on man" (de Lauretis, *Alice* 109). Yet when Joe gains entry to the cave, it is paradoxically a space of light rather than darkness, and of domesticity rather than alterity.

object which is all too easily written upon, by Joe and by others. Her picture acts as an empty signifier for Joe and Violet (J 12), and she becomes a doubled and ghostly presence in their home (J 28). Alice's reaction to the march which commemorates Dorcas' parents' death is written in part upon the image of the "silent staring child" (J 58) at her side, and her description by Felice as one who "just missed" (J 201) beauty reflects the lack of the "inside nothing" (J 38) she shares with Joe. Lacking substance in these instances, Dorcas is designated by the narrator as wholly untruthful: "I always believed that girl was a pack of lies" (J 72).

Onto this apparently empty field, Joe projects an image of Dorcas and an image of himself. His knowledge of her is a litany of visual artifacts, memorialised in her "sugar-flawed skin, the high wild bush the bed pillows made of her hair, her bitten nails, the heartbreaking way she stood, toes pointed in" (J 28). When Joe identifies Dorcas beyond the apparent facticity of her visual image, their relationship is repeatedly symbolised as a rewriting of the narrative of the Fall.

I told you again that you were the reason Adam ate the apple and its core. That when he left Eden, he left a rich man. Not only did he have Eve, but he had the taste of the first apple in the world in his mouth for the rest of his life. The very first to know what it was like. To bite it, bite it down. Hear the crunch and let the red peeling break his heart. (J 133)

"Anything just for you. To bite down hard, chew up the core and have the taste of red apple skin to carry around for the rest of my life" (J 134). Joe imagines himself as Adam, as the founder of mankind and founder of his own experience through his consumption of the apple from the tree of knowledge, which he figures as the foundation rather than the loss of self-presence inherent in language: "Don't ever think I fell for you, or fell over you. I didn't fall in love, I rose in it. I saw you and made up my mind. My mind" (J 135). Joe's defiant act of choice can be read as an inversion of the myth of the Fall in the context of racial difference and the differential authority of black and white constructions of identity in the historical context of the novel, but despite this radical rereading on Joe's part, his narrative continues to be founded on the division of gender. Joe also rewrites the Fall myth to claim a more central position of authority for himself as Adam, as "the very first to know what it was like". In the Fall myth, Adam's experience of the apple is *not* original, but follows Eve's (Genesis 3,6). By positioning himself as not only the originator of mankind, but also original

possessor of knowledge, Joe effaces Eve / Dorcas's role. The construction of the female role in Joe's narrative of the Fall enacts a series of displacements from the original founding position he claims for himself, displacing Eve from the experience of knowledge, and constructing his experience of Dorcas as the experience of something he receives from her (the apple / knowledge/ her body) but over which he claims authority. Hence Joe's experience of Dorcas is not an experience of Dorcas herself, but the experience of experiencing her as the apple / knowledge / self-knowledge. Their relationship is not reciprocal; rather Joe finds himself in Dorcas without returning her gaze: "You looked at me then like you knew me, and I thought it really was Eden, and I couldn't take your eyes in because I was loving the hoof marks on your cheeks" (J 133).

Joe's loss of Eden begins not with his temptation, nor with Dorcas' death, but with her refusal to remain within her allotted role within his narrative, and this refusal is not simply her rejection of the role he assigns her, but the rejection of his authority over her identity as such. His memory of her is already fading when he goes in search of her, and this disintegration of her image begins when she rejects him: "Even then, listening to her talk, to the terrible things she said, he felt he was losing the timbre of her voice and what happened to her eyelids when they made love" (J 29). The absence of Joe's image of Dorcas obliterates her actual bodily presence in this scene, and his grief over her death is outweighed by his fear of the loss of his memories of her (J 28).

Joe's narrative then exhibits a doubled desire to set his identity within a narrative structure which provides the grounds for his identity, and to get beyond the emptiness of language. His desire for self-presence and self-knowledge can be fulfilled only through the imposition of a patriarchal discourse which locates the female as an object upon which male identity is inscribed. As de Lauretis suggests of the Oedipal drama, "The drama has the movement of a passage, a crossing, an actively experienced transformation of the human being into - man" (*Alice* 121). This moment of self-founding is inherently repetitive in Joe's narrative, and he attempts to stabilise this moment through the image of Dorcas and the stabilisation of her identity. When she attempts to reject this position, the hunt on which he embarks is not, I would suggest,

focused on the movement of the quest but upon the cessation of movement.³⁴ The hero in myth is the one who moves the drama (de Lauretis, *Alice* 112) yet in Morrison's texts, it is often not the male but the female who is constructed as the active agent of transformation. Just as Beloved "moved" Paul D in a manner he cannot account for (*B* 114), Wild, Violet and Dorcas are all figured as catalysts of movement in men:

Girls can do that. Steer a man away from death or drive him right to it. Pull you out of sleep and you wake up on the ground under a tree you'll never locate again because you're lost. Or if you do find it, it won't be the same. (*J* 173)

In both of these instances, the agency of the female appears as a threat to the possibility of male stability and identity, and in Joe's case, the violence he carries out against Dorcas can be seen as the logical yet self-defeating end-point of his desire to fix her as the object of his narrative.

This reading of the construction of Joe's narrative of identity under the Oedipal structure locates the origin of Joe's narrative drive in a notion of patriarchy which is the product of Western culture and literature, and which locates the primary difference which is the motor of identity formation as gendered. *Jazz* contests this privileging of gender difference as an origin by the insertion of racial difference into Joe's narrative, where the original impulse to self-identity is not the desire to usurp the father, as in the Oedipal myth (de Lauretis, *Alice* 114) but a result of the disorientating and destabilising effects of race and racial prejudice. Referring to his rural past, Joe states:

I talk about being new seven times before I met you, but back then, back there, if you was or claimed to be coloured, you had to be new and stay the same every day the sun rose and every night it dropped. And let me tell you baby, in those days it was more than a state of mind. (135)

Therefore Joe's narrative of self-founding cannot simply be explained by the imposition of the Western Oedipal structure, and indicates the interaction of Western culture and the conditions of selfhood experienced by African Americans. These continue to be gendered, but are not only gendered.

Joe attempts to dominate Dorcas' narrative, but this is never fully successful and multiple narrative strategies continue to gesture to knowledges beyond his imposition of

³⁴ A similar desire for stasis can be found in the description of male-female power relations in the commodified world of appearances of the city. "Three girls pile out of the train and clack down the icy stairs. Three waiting men greet them and they all pair off. It is biting cold. The girls have red lips and their legs whisper to each other through silk stockings. The red lips and the silk flash power. A power they will exchange for the right to be overcome, penetrated. The men at their side love it because, in the end, they will reach in, extend, get back behind that power, grab it and keep it still" (*J* 181-2).

a narrative structure and ultimately beyond the text itself. Many critical readings have related this to the presence of jazz in the novel. I want to continue to examine the production of Dorcas' identity to show that the liberatory power of jazz, as an alternative narrative structure, is also held in suspension, and that this abyssal suspension of knowledge is the condition of narrative in this novel.

Jazz music, as structure and theme, has inevitably occupied a privileged position in the criticism of *Jazz* the novel. Morrison herself has made a number of comments on the position jazz music holds for her as a form which resists closure (McKay, "Interview" 426) and which is central to the structure of the novel: "the jazz-like structure was not a secondary thing for me - it was the *raison d'être* of the book."³⁵ A large body of criticism on the novel has embraced the question of the novel's participation in a "jazz aesthetic" as a particularly African American literary style which combines the improvised and performative nature of jazz music, and the implications of this for the relationships between the reader, performer / writer and text, with structural tropes such as rhythm, the riff, break and solo / chorus.³⁶ A corresponding body of work exists which seeks to question the ways in which the "jazz aesthetic" has been identified in this work; in particular a number of critics have sought to question the applicability of the tropes and structures of jazz as a musical style to literary criticism, suggesting that the metaphor of jazz as a critical tool to explain textual effects has been overused, suggesting that a jazz "analogy" is more appropriate than "jazz aesthetic"³⁷. Rather than examine these claims directly, I want to highlight what appears to be at stake in this debate; the racial nature of jazz, the existence of jazz as an African American cultural form which can generate an oppositional critical practice, and the racial identity of Morrison's text. Alan Rice makes the political demand behind reading Morrison's text as a jazz aesthetic clear: "if the problem at the center of Morrison's writing is to

³⁵ Toni Morrison "The Art of Fiction CXXXIV." *Paris Review* 128 (1993) 110, quoted in Jones 492.

³⁶ Henry Louis Gates defines a number of these tropes in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Literary Criticism*. Anthony J. Berret's "Toni Morrison's Literary Jazz" is one of the earlier critical readings of Morrison's work as featured a "jazz aesthetic" (predating *Jazz* itself). Notable readings of *Jazz* as displaying a "jazz aesthetic" include Paula Gallant Eckard "The Interplay of Music, Language and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*"; Robin Small-McCarthy "The Jazz Aesthetic in the Novels of Toni Morrison"; Alan J. Rice "Jazzing It Up A Storm: The Execution and Meaning of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* Prose Style."

³⁷ See for example Alan Munton "Misreading Morrison, Mishearing Jazz: A Response to Toni Morrison's Jazz Critics" and Peter Townsend *Jazz in American Culture* 121-144.

maintain African-American cultural heritage in the face of its undermining in modern America, her willed use of Black American cultural forms is central to that endeavour” (432). It seems to me that neither Morrison’s “problem” nor her use of cultural forms can, on the basis of *Jazz* at least, be so easily determined, and that this novel, despite its clear engagement with black cultural forms, resists the representation of African American culture as open to a single and totalising interpretation. Following Fritz Gysin’s suggestion that the use of jazz metaphors in critical discourse must be set in their own historical context, I want to examine Morrison’s use of jazz not only as structural and thematic device but also as a historical artifact which contains multiple and ambiguous meanings.

Jazz is set in 1926, the period of the “Jazz Age”, and of the Harlem Renaissance. References to these illustrious historical settings are oblique, found in Joe’s claim that “You could say I’ve been a new Negro all my life” (J 129), echoing the Harlem Renaissance “New Negro” slogan and the evocation of Jazz Age imagery of “Long Island debutantes” and “the graceful slouch of the men slipping their hands into the pockets of their tuxedo trousers” (J 227). The novel sets itself at a distance from the centres of white mainstream jazz of the Jazz Age and the middle class black cultural achievements of the Harlem Renaissance, and takes place within communities constructed by these historical eras as marginal: the working class black life of the city and the rural settings of the south. Jazz music winds through the city streets watched by the narrator: this music sets the scene in clubs, parties and the streets, and evokes thoughts of the erotic and the criminal. Like the city itself, presided over by “A colored man [who] floats down out of the sky blowing a saxophone” (J 8), jazz music appears to disrupt agency and identity and to usurp the individual intentional consciousness of its listeners.

Jazz in the novel evokes a time and place within the city which extends beyond the meaning of jazz as a musical form. As Eric Porter notes:

Urbanisation; migration; race, gender and class relations; communication technologies; and the growth of mass culture - all had an impact on the growth of jazz and the way people received it. In addition to being music, jazz was a business enterprise and a set of institutional relationships, a focal point for political and social debate, a vehicle for individual and communal identity, and, eventually, an idea. (6)

Here, Porter historicises the “idea” of jazz which has given rise to such critical

paradigms as Houston Baker's "blues matrix" and the analogy between culture and history at the centre of Amiri Baraka's Blues People. While such black cultural nationalist accounts celebrate the power of jazz as an oppositional force of black culture in white society, I want to suggest that Morrison's representation of jazz, as a social and historical forum and as a cultural resource of self-fashioning is more problematic than proponents of the Black Arts movement have sometimes suggested.

Historically, jazz music, and even the name "jazz" itself, has been often associated with a lack of both social and cultural respectability by the African American elite in the first decades of the twentieth century.³⁸ Lawrence Levine, in "Jazz and American Culture," suggests that notions of "jazz" and "culture" produced a dialectic in early twentieth century America, with the emergence of distinctions between low and high culture coinciding with the increased visibility of jazz as a cultural form, and argues that for some middle class black community leaders this led to a call to reject jazz as conforming too easily to racial stereotypes.³⁹

In this context, jazz presented African American community leaders with a complex problem: as Eric Porter suggests, "Jazz had become a site for African American artistic achievements, but [...] it was also symbolic of the restrictions that American society placed on their lives as artists and human beings" (2). This debate took place within the context of a struggle within mainstream American society over the status of racial difference and the status of those marked as racially "other" within segregationist ideology.

Even as [Black leaders] celebrated a racially defined art, they were aware of the constraints of race as a socially determined identity expressed through culture. One might celebrate black cultural distinctiveness as a means of subverting segregation or biologically based ideas of black inferiority, but one still faced a situation in which the idea of distinct black characteristics (whether biological or cultural) was central to the logic of early-century racist propaganda directed against African Americans. (Porter 13)

³⁸ Alan Merriam and Fradley Garner note that "jazz" was a common synonym for sex (20), and record contemporary calls for a different name to be found to describe the musical style. One example explains the reasons for this call: "Jazz presents to the mind disorder. It is suggestive of things unpleasant, of atavistic leanings of which we are all properly ashamed, of borrowings from savages, of near-orgies that have quite properly been combated by those who have care of the young and the morals of youth. The word has evil associations [...]" (published in the Musical Courier 1924: 25-6). The letter was published anonymously, but the connotations of the term "savages" at the time were clearly racial.

³⁹ Levine also makes the point that the terms "low brow" and "high brow" coined in this period are distinctly racial, drawing on the imagery if not the actual ideology of phrenology (436).

Therefore the image of jazz as ‘purely’ oppositional, particularly as a product of black nationalist movements and black aesthetic movements, is itself a construct of a historically determined desire for black cultural forms which is contested by the social and cultural history of jazz in the early twentieth century, and I would argue that *Jazz* the novel makes use of both the celebratory power of jazz and its cultural historical ambiguity.

Jazz as a political resource also has a problematic relationship to gender. Female images in the early twentieth century were ambiguously placed in relation to jazz in mainstream culture, as Linden Peach notes in his reading of the novel (115). In her study of women’s blues, Hazel Carby suggests that the content of women’s urban blues which express a potent, defiant and self-actualised black female sexuality has been overlooked as a result of the critical tradition’s privileging of the literary products of the black middle classes, which responded to stereotypes of black female sexuality by repressing representations of black female desire, enacting a “displacement from female desire to female duty” (12).⁴⁰ While female authored works were often excluded from the canon, jazz was also linked to ideas of masculinity, in particular a criminal, or dangerous masculinity which was written against and in contrast to ideas of African American female respectability (Porter 26, 29). This constitutes a problematic relationship between the female image within jazz, the silencing of certain female jazz voices and the creation of an opposition between a male-coded art form and contrasting images of appropriate female identity.

When Dorcas moves from the position of object in Joe’s narrative of the Fall, her identity is inscribed instead in the social economy of the jazz underground, the world of the “adult party” (J 187) imagined as a war zone in which the realities of bloodshed return as artifice (J 191), and “the market where gesture is all” (J 192). In this space of commodified appearance, Dorcas conforms and finds her identity through the strictures of the marketplace, defined by Acton, the “young rooster” for whom she

⁴⁰ See also Angela Y. Davis *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. In “Policing the Black Women’s Body in an Urban Context,” Hazel Carby notes the construction of independent, working class black women as a threat to social stability in the early twentieth century city, a threat which had to be controlled through the disciplining of black women’s movements and bodies within the city, which was seen as a dangerously undisciplined space in which black women, pathologised as weak or immoral, would be unable to achieve the standards of respectability required by white, and black, middle class society. Both social tracts and novels from the period play out the dangers of the urban experience through black female characters who act as spaces on which sexual and class relations can be mapped.

competes with other women, and through whom she gains her desired personality.

Dorcas' identity appears to be entirely subjugated to her presence as image, and this image is constructed through consumable images of femininity, typified by Felice's comment that for Dorcas "[e]verything was like a picture show to her, and she was the one on the railroad track, or the one trapped in the sheik's tent when it caught on fire" (J 203). The voluntary subjection of Dorcas' identity to consumable film images and the conventional language of physical beauty ("What pencil thin eyebrows do for my face is a dream" (J 190)) creates a deep ambivalence in the functioning of jazz as a potentially oppositional cultural practice⁴¹, culminating in the irreducibly multiple meanings of Dorcas' death. Her death may be the result of an act of violence, the result of a desire to save Joe, a decisive (though deadly) act of self-assertion and, potentially, the adoption of a commodified role of tragic romance.

In contrast to her location as an object of Joe's narrative, Dorcas actively participates in the performance of her own identity in the jazz underground, but the liberatory potential of the identity is circumscribed by its participation in the commodification of identity as a medium of exchange. Her final statement: "Listen. I don't know who is that woman singing but I know the words by heart" (J 193) indicates the ambivalence of her relationship with the identifying structures of jazz as found in the jazz underground where specific identity appears to be sacrificed to the trope of an innate yet unrepresentable knowledge. Therefore the cultural and social practices of jazz in the novel are not simply oppositional or liberatory despite their resistance to mainstream culture and their inculcation of a culture of the "illegal" and therefore potentially subversive. The subversive power of jazz appears in the novel in conjunction with other forms of expression and it is through this juxtaposition of structures that the transformatory power of the text and of its narrative strategies is performed.

⁴¹ Critical commentary on the relationship between jazz and the commodification of life in Western society has frequently sought to argue that this relationship is essentially oppositional. Paul Berliner and James Snead both describe the musically non-goal orientated structure of jazz as resistant to commodification while Jim Merod suggests that jazz resists the logic of commodification through its ambivalent relationship to American culture, through its identification with black culture - black identity resistant to / resisted by mainstream US culture. I want to argue that the transition from readings of the musical structure of jazz to its effects as a social practice and cultural form must be carefully negotiated, and that the boundaries between African American culture and mainstream white American culture are permeable. Therefore I will seek to differentiate between Dorcas' social experience of jazz as a cultural practice and the implications of music as a form of narrative elsewhere in the novel.

Alice's experience of the march of black protesters demonstrating against the violence of whites in the urban race riots of the early twentieth century is one aspect of this alternative performative. Alice experiences the drums which accompany the marchers as an alternative to language which is unable to express the meaning of the march: "What was possible to say was already in print on a banner that repeated a couple of promises from the Declaration of Independence and waved over the head of its bearer. But what was meant came from the drums" (J 53). The negligible promises of the Declaration of Independence are meaningless in the context of the march which locates black politics at the heart of the city (Fifth Avenue), if only temporarily, and recreates this space as an environment responsive to black protests (J 53).

The effect of the drums for Alice is not only to create a bridge between the speakable and the unspeakable, but also between the individual and the collective by linking the communal voice of political protest with the individual victim; Dorcas, whose parents have been killed in a race riot.

She read the words and looked at Dorcas. Looked at Dorcas and read the words again. What she read seemed crazy, out of focus. Some huge gap lunged between the print and the child. She glanced between them struggling for the connection, something to close the distance between the silent staring child and the slippery crazy words. Then suddenly, like a rope cast for rescue, the drums spanned the distance, gathering them all up and connecting them: Alice, Dorcas, her sister and brother-in-law, the Boy Scouts and the frozen black faces, the watchers on the pavement and those in the windows above. (J 58)

In Alice's experience, the drums perform a political function in connecting the multiplicity of individual victims with the communal articulation and demonstration of the march, without reducing the incommensurable experience of Dorcas' own victimhood.

From this experience of the marcher's drums a theory of connectivity across difference develops which seems to be crucial to the narrative politics of the novel and to the possible resolution of the narratives of violence located there. Alice initially dismisses jazz through an ambivalent response which identifies jazz as at once "just colored folks stuff: harmful, certainly, embarrassing, of course, but not real, not serious" (J 59) and as a serious expression of anger which is an incitement to violence and the embodiment of violence itself: "just hearing it was like violating the law" (J 58). Alice's ambivalent response to jazz is structured around her desire to maintain a series of separations which jazz challenges, between the mind and the body (J 56)

and private life from the life of the streets (J 72-3) yet the experience of the drums, whose order appears to be the structural opposite of jazz, comes to share an imagined connection with jazz which does not reduce either of these structures to the other but which holds them in opposition yet also relation. “It was impossible to keep the Fifth Avenue drums separate from the belt-buckle tunes vibrating from pianos and spinning on every Victrola. Impossible” (J 59). Remembering jazz lyrics, Alice finds “They are greedy reckless words, loose and infuriating, but hard to dismiss because underneath, holding up the looseness like a palm, are the drums that put Fifth Avenue into focus” (J 60). This experience of a relationship between jazz and the drums connects the political protest of the marchers with the anger and violence repeatedly associated with jazz in the text and reinforces the relationship between political protest and the outbursts of racial violence experienced by black Americans in this period. This connectivity complicates stable distinctions between the political rationality of the protests which makes recourse to the legal rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence and irruptions of anger and violence which must then also be seen as political in cause and effect. In addition, this experience of connectivity links different aspects of black cultural and social life: the lower middle class milieu Alice inhabits, the working class street life of Violet and Joe and the jazz underground of the clubs, without the reduction of black cultural and social life to a single identity.

The drums of the marchers not only bridge a gap, they create a space into which jazz is placed and which allows the expression of anger within political argument, and that expression is made possible through the very wordlessness of these mediums. Hence Alice’s reaction is through gesture rather than speech, a gesture which attempts to create a balance between the political anger of the drums and the personal desire of jazz. This experience of connectivity across difference is signified in the text by the image of two opposing and balancing gestures that Alice performs: the narrator recalls observing her:

reach with one hand for the safe gathering rope thrown to her eight years ago on Fifth Avenue, and ball the other one into a fist in her coat pocket. I don’t know how she did it - balance herself with two different hand gestures. But she was not alone in trying, and she was not alone in losing. (J 59)

Alice “loses” in the narrator’s view because the separation of jazz and the drums cannot be secured, yet I would argue that this does not result in the reduction of one to

the other. Rather, the relationship between these two opposing structures of knowledge and desire, these two gestures, can be described as an experience of undecidability which Alice undergoes and which can be seen as a model of relating meaning and experience which informs the political narrative of the text. In the undecidable relationship, when a relationship is held *en abyme*, subject / object relationships are destabilised in such a way that they cannot be set in hierarchy. "The subject is then faced with its inability to know what it knows, to see what it sees" (Elam 28). For Alice, this experience results in a destabilisation of the distinctions between the lawful and the unlawful upon which she has previously structured her experience,⁴² and leads to her relationship with Violet, designated in the text as Alice's structural opposite (J 73). The undecidability of this structure therefore does not result in inactivity or political stasis, but a politics of continual negotiation and exchange. Derrida argues that:

Undecidability is always a *determinate* oscillation between possibilities [...] I say 'undecidability' rather than 'indeterminacy' because I am interested more in relations of force, in everything that allows, precisely, determinations in given situations to be stabilised through a decision of writing. (*Limited Inc* 148)

The narrative drive forwards does not therefore rest on any individual decision of writing, but on a continual process of creation which remains open to question rather than being stabilised by the decidability of 'truth'. Christopher Norris suggests that undecidability represents "a mode of thinking that can best exert its critical leverage at those points where rational discourse comes up against the limits of calculability" (163), and I would argue that within the narrative structures of *Jazz*, the experience of connectivity over difference that Alice finds in the relationship between the drums and jazz works in opposition to the desire for stasis found in the hierarchal power relations elsewhere in the novel, in the gendered narrative which structures Joe's autobiography and in the deconstructed but ghostly form of the detective plot. The relationship of the narrator with the detective plot and the narrator's own self-constructed status as a locus of knowledge which can be held in distinction from the rest of the text is challenged not only by the destabilisation of the roles of subject and object carried out by the narrator's direct interventions into the text (for example in the passages reimagining Golden Gray) but also by the denial of the possibility of stasis and the insistence on change which

⁴² For an analysis of the failure of Alice's status as lawful or outlaw see Patricia McKee *Producing American Races* 195; Jeffrey J. Folks 168.

characterises the undecidable found at the end of the novel. Initially the narrator predicts that narrative will end in repetition; that the narrative will take on a circular structure through the substitution of Felice for Dorcas which will result in the repetition of Joe and Violet's violent acts (J 220). The narrator's desire to confine them within narrative stasis is challenged by the multiplicity of narrative possibilities produced by the juxtaposition of explanatory forms and structures provided by the text which cannot be reduced to a single narrative trajectory. Therefore, against the narrator's expectation, violence does not simply lead to another act of violence, and the identity of the perpetrators of violent acts in the novel are always more than single. In the context of the narrative construction of identities as sites of creativity and multiplicity⁴³ rather than the stabilisation of identity, neither Joe nor Violet can be securely located under the identities such as "Violent," or as criminals, just as Dorcas' is not only a 'victim.'

Both of these novels, Beloved and Jazz, ends with the appearance of repetition and reappearance of moments of conflict which, through repetition, are opened up to the possibility of reinterpretation, difference and change. In the repetition of the violent moment in Beloved, the violence of the moment is thwarted through the intervention of the community, yet the retelling of this moment in the stories of Paul D and Stamp Paid, and the power it contains to enact change through the exorcism of Beloved means that the moment of violence is gestured to even as it fails to be fulfilled. The repetition of violence in Jazz, by contrast, is suggested from the beginning of the text, yet the fulfilment of this moment is continually delayed through the temporal excursions of the narrative, and ultimately occurs only as the non-appearance of narrative expectation. Yet in both of these novels, the violent moment is not dispelled by the act of repetition, and the event of violence is displaced rather than negated, through the insistence that the question of justice remains open in Sethe's case, and through the relocation of violence in Jazz onto the person of the narrator: "What turned out to be different was who shot whom" (6). Therefore, in both of these texts, moments of violence are represented through an examination of the production of discourses and narrative strategies which seek to contain the problem of violence, and both suggest that the problem of violence

⁴³ Vikki Bell, in an analysis of the creation of identity as a state of flux rather than stability in the novel, suggests that racial identity itself can be read as a motor of movement (8).

may in fact be that it cannot be contained.

Through their examination of cases of violence which appear to be open to the scrutiny of the law and the judgments of criminal justice, these texts enact a deconstruction of the relationships of force which shape the possibility of such scrutiny and such judgments. Through the repetition of their pivotal moments of violence, repetitions which also decentre these moments, these texts suggest that through such a process of deconstruction the force of violence can be dislocated from its effects on and between individuals and transferred into attacks upon authority - on the relations of force inscribed by the logic of identity. While I have suggested that the locus of authority in Beloved can be found in the co-present but conflicting conceptions of identity found under slavery and in liberal humanism which have had a historical impact on the experiences of black Americans, this authority is not simply the authority of the state as such, but the authority inscribed in the rule of law which produces its subjects under the logic of identity. The construction of Sethe's case, as a story before the law, reveals the narrative authority of the law but also undermines this narrative through the impossibility of making Sethe's action commensurate with definitions of legality and illegality, criminality or victimhood, through the insistence upon the context of slavery under which this violence occurs. As a result, the narrative authority of the law is faced with the challenge of hermeneutics, which resists the suggestion that Sethe's violence can be accounted for either under the law or within the text itself. The question of narrative authority in Jazz is distributed among a number of narrators, yet at significant points these narrators seek to claim a position of authority which is undercut by the existence of an opposing narrative, in the case of Joe, and by the excessive nature of the textual objects constructed by the unnamed narrator, which repeatedly escape the narrator's control and so reveal the strategies of force and authority at work.

In Beloved and Jazz, the repetition of moments of violence which are turned outwards towards discourses of authority rather than contained within the individual reveals the extent to which violence is a possession of the law, rather than the individual, and the inadequacy of judicial accounts of violence which attempt to identify, explain and so extirpate moments of violence through the imposition of judgments of legality or illegality. The significant lack of closure in these texts, and the extent to which they insist upon a relationship between narration, reading and judgment can be seen as a

demand for new narratives of justice which can expose, rather than contain, relations of force, and by identifying violence as a possession of authority rather than a characteristic of the individual, these texts do a great deal of work in problematising solutions to violence, particularly racial but also gendered violence, in society: though individual actions initially appear to be the origins of violence in these texts, the narratives of authority which contain these actions are deconstructed to reveal that violence is not simply the possession of an individual, or even a group, but is a feature of widespread social relations.

Conclusion: The Persistence of Violence

In the novels of Toni Morrison, the representation of violence is consistently implicated in representations of identity. Her characters go through experiences of physical and psychological violence whose effects extend far beyond the moment of violence itself. Morrison's textual strategies in regard to these events of violence highlight the unrepresentability of violence as a physical effect, and the instrumental nature of violence as an act whose effects and ends cannot be securely projected from the moment of violence itself. Therefore, the textual characteristic of representations of violence is the disruption of causal relationships and narrative logic. As a result of the textual nature of violence, and the possibly excessive nature of representations of violence, the effect of violent acts and the event of violence as such is disseminated across Morrison's texts.

This dissemination of violence, as representation and as event, brings into question the authorising structures of identity which appear in Morrison's texts. All too often, apparently coherent and consistent identities located in these texts are destabilised through contact with events and forces of violence, and as I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this argument, the destabilising effects of violence in Morrison's texts cannot be reduced to the psychological character of violence or to concepts of individual trauma. Rather, the destabilising effect of violence in these texts stems from the ways in which violence is shown to be implicated in the construction of identity itself. By bringing to the surface the unspeakable role of violence in the construction of identity, Morrison's texts expose the trace effects of violence contained within ideologies of racial identity, and exhibit the relations of force at work within these ideologies. As a result, violence does not emerge in her texts as an event outside identity, or a traumatic event which impacts upon identity, but in key strategic ways, comes to exist alongside and potentially replace structures of identity.

However, this textual representation of violence as a part of rather than in

opposition to identity does not attain the status of a universal category in Morrison's texts. As a result of her attention to specific conditions of black identity in America, and in particular the implications of racial difference for the production of theories of violence, Morrison conforms to John Keane's dictum, mentioned in the introduction, that the pervasive nature of violence must be historicised if our accounts of the persistence of violence are to have any useful meaning. By analysing the ways in which violence has been implicated in black identity in the United States, from the location of criminality within the black body to the structural effects of violent practices such as lynching and the liminal relationship between black Americans and their identities as citizens produced through the effects of slavery and segregation, violence emerges in Morrison's texts not as the possession of the individual but as a structural practice. This doubled identity of violence - as excessive and unrepresentable, but also as structural and authoritative - appears as a productive paradox in Morrison's texts. The doubled identity of violence does not render violence ineffective within relationships of force, but rather institutes the non-disclosure of authoritative violence through displacement of the identity of violence onto the individual, the irrational, and the non-productive.

One result of Morrison's critique of violence as implicated in relations of force is the deconstruction of the binary of violence and non-violence. As my account of the representation of the violence of the state and of the law in her texts suggests, the location of violence, and in particular permissible and impermissible acts of violence, is mapped according to authoritative narrative structures which seek to confine the effects of violence and the possible meanings of violence. By exposing the construction of authority in these narratives, and therefore opening up to question the identifications of violence contained therein, Morrison's texts suggest that there may be no outside to violence, but once again this is consistently represented in terms of the specific rather than the universal.

If, as I have suggested, violence is a part of identity and the production of difference in identity, this has implications for the relationships between different identities. Many of Morrison's novels recount the destructive effects of events of violence which occur within black communities, but the identity of these events of violence can never be securely located within these communities alone. While this provides a critique of the effects of racism on black American identity, the internal

violence of the black community is therefore always also a violence between identities produced through racial difference. As I suggested in the introduction, my reading of Morrison's texts took as a starting point the idea of these texts as "interfaces" or productions of a "border consciousness." What I hope to have demonstrated in the course of this argument is that the relationship between the communities of difference whose borders Morrison maps may be as much a relationship of violence as it is a relationship of culture. Therefore, the political implications of the persistence of violence in Morrison's texts, and the doubled identity of violence as excessive and as structural, are that mediations between different identities both within and on the borders of differentiated racial communities are as likely to occur by violent as by cultural means, and that this violence is not simply the effect of improper relations, but inherent within the relationship of difference itself.

Having made this case for the location of violence in Morrison's work, I want to contest the apparent political pessimism of this position. While Morrison's representation of violence as a pervasive feature of relationships of difference appears to doom these relationships to failure, this failure will not be averted by the consignment of identities of violence to the 'mad and bad,' and if, as Keane suggests, the persistence of violence must be assessed in its historical context, it would appear that it is only through critical attention to the means by which violence persists in contemporary society that we can hope to change this historical context, a critical project in which I believe Morrison's work participates. Finally, I want to demonstrate the implications of this position through a negative example which I believe provides a contrast to the treatment of violence and identity in the majority of Morrison's work, and as such, in my argument, marks the limits of Morrison's political critique carried out through the structures of violence and the effects of limiting this critique.

In my reading of Paradise in section one, I suggested that this novel demonstrates the territorial division of space through racial identity, and the territorial impulse to guard such divisions through the imposition both of racial identity as a limit position of difference and the displacement of violence onto the other as a justification for violence carried against those identified as other, and as such I would suggest that the novel shares many features with earlier works and with the critique of violence outlined in this argument. However, the ending of Paradise contrasts to the

representation of violence and the effects of violence as seen in Morrison's other works. The novel opens with the violent attack on the Convent women, as described above, and in a structure shared by a number of other Morrison novels, the remainder of the text can be seen as an attempt to examine and interpret this event. The novel ends, however, with a moment of apparent closure through transcendence which appears at odds with the ambivalence regarding closure found in the previous novels. The relationships of conflict described in Paradise come to a point of crisis through the attack on the Convent, and it is through the resolution of this action that closure in the novel is achieved. While the attack on the Convent is represented from multiple perspectives and gives rise to multiple interpretations, one feature which appears to be confirmed is the apparently miraculous escape and physical resurrection of the women who have been the victims of this attack. At least two of the Convent women are injured, apparently mortally, in the attack on the Convent, yet all but Connie appear in the final pages of the novel, in scenes which reconnect them with their lives and imply that they are moving on to the future (P 309-18). This reappearance of the Convent women is foreshadowed by their disappearance from the site of the attack itself, where virtually no physical sign of the violent attack of the townsmen remains: "a sheet and a folded raincoat on the table the only sign that a body had been there" (P 292). Further, their reappearance is also foreshadowed by the barefoot walk (P 300) taken by Deacon Morgan, which signals the changes the town will undergo as a result of the Convent attack. By the disappearance of the signs of physical violence at the site at which the violence occurred, the symbolic nature of Deacon Morgan's atonement and the *deus ex machina* of physical resurrection as a solution to the effects of violence, the violence which occurs at the Convent takes on a metaphorical status which contains the implications of effects of this act. No one is tried, no one is found guilty. In fact, in contrast to the doubled identity of crime in previous works, it becomes debatable whether there has been a crime at all.

In part the resolution of Paradise is a continuation of the production of both the Convent women and the townsmen as quasi-symbolic entities whose individuality has been subsumed to the group in ways which depersonalise and therefore alienate the effects of the violence which occurs between them. The individuality of the women of the Convent is initially erased by the introduction of "the white girl" (an erasure at the hands of the townsmen) yet this is echoed in the "loud dreaming" in which the women

share each other's experiences (P 264), and in the formulaic visit each appears to make to their past in the closing chapter. A similar dissolution occurs through the women's descent (ascent?) into spirituality. They are commanded by Connie not to allow the separation of spirit and body, the separation forced upon her by the Catholic nuns. "Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (P 263). Yet this is what occurs in the cellar: "They had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below" (P 265). In this turn to a communal identity, the women's bodies are gradually replaced by the image of their bodies, and as a result the violence done to their bodies takes on the aura of the unreal. This move from the 'real' to a spiritual reality and spiritual physicality is also announced in the question shared by Anna and Misner; the question of "What on earth?" (P 305) This gesture to a limit, the earthly, is also a gesture beyond the earthly, towards the transcendent and it is through the move to a transcendent, supernatural reality that Morrison effects closure. The novel closes with an image apparently set outside time and history, which may be a representation of heaven and of Connie's presence there.

What is noticeable about the closure of this novel in comparison to other works by Morrison is that while a number of her previous novels have ended in the ambiguity of flight, Paradise provides a representation of where this flight leads. The reappearances of the Convent women outside the boundaries of Ruby are marked by certain features; in fact, the women appear to be prepared for an armed struggle. Gigi appears wearing army gear and apparently carrying a gun (P 310), Pallas carries a sword (P 311), Mavis has shorn her hair (P 313) while Seneca appears to have resolved the problems which caused her to turn violence on herself (P 317). The reappearance of the women implies a redemptive quality of violence which is rarely expressed in the previous novels, and certainly not expressed unproblematically, yet the removal of the women from the scene of violence and from the community in which this violence occurs suggests an end to the effects of violence - that violence can and has been resolved - through the imposition of a boundary between the site of violence and its effects. This representation renders violence metaphorical to the extent that it comes to stand for something other than itself. Therefore, although the closure of this novel implies the positive potential of community identity and communal bonding shared by the women and by the townspeople, I would

suggest that this vision of communal identity is the express result of the isolation of one community from the other, and a closure of the permeable boundaries between communities and identities that Morrison's other works, and indeed elements of Paradise itself insist upon. Therefore I find in Paradise a limit to Morrison's engagement with the political critique of structures of identity and violence through its turn to structures of identity which celebrate, but ironically reify, communal identity, through a restabilisation of the boundaries between identities which is achieved by the displacement of the effects of violence.

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